

WHY I AM AN ATHEIST

A Sermon by Ronald Knapp, Minister Emeritus FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF OMAHA

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

Sioux City, Iowa

September 16, 2007

A

Fifty-four or fifty-five years ago I gave my first sermon. I can't remember the exact date. It was either late 1952 or early 1953. I presented that sermon in Zion, Illinois at a Youth For Christ meeting. At that time, Anne was my girlfriend and I remember that she sat in the congregation making notes on my incorrect use of grammar, diction, etc.

I still have that sermon. I still have all my sermons if I could tell just how to locate them in the chaos that is my study. The gods were cooperative this time, however, and I found a copy of it. Now, it is not a copy like my later sermons. It is not in manuscript form. It is only an outline. At that time, and for several years after that, I thought it was unchristian to write out sermons. One should let the Holy Spirit speak. But I do have my notes.

The title of that first sermon was "Why I am a Christian." Now fifty-four or fifty-five years later the title of my sermon this morning is "Why I Am an Atheist." I believe that this may be the first time I ever referred to myself from the pulpit as an atheist. Depending on perspective one might say, "you've come a long way baby" - or one might say, "Ron, you are well on your way to hell!"

B

It was interesting to me, in preparation for this sermon to review my notes on that sermon from so many years ago. Perhaps you might be interested in that as well.

I did write out the introduction to that sermon, although I think I did that after I was appointed to be the minister of the Hope and Edenville Methodist Churches in Michigan. That was in 1953. Here is my introduction:

You have probably all heard hard questions like these at one time or another. Why be a Christian? It isn't worth it! Or, why be a Christian? I am such a bad character God couldn't love me any more! Or, why do you so called Christians act like a bunch of radicals? Or, you might have heard or at least many people have thought: I'm young. I'll eat, drink and be merry today, and tomorrow I'll find religion. Then again you might have heard some one say: oh, I'm a pretty good fellow; I give money to the church and go once in a while; that is all that God expects. Then there is the certain type of person that says: why do you insist I go to church -- I can worship God better out in Nature. I would like to answer some of these people this morning, and tell them why they should be Christians.

I did attempt to answer those questions, but my notes lack details so I am not sure what I said except that I quoted a lot of Bible verses, like "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." I did make several interesting statements, such as:

Alcohol is a wonderful thing - but not for use in the stomach or perverting the mind.

Goodness important but not everything.

And perhaps most interesting of all, in light of the self centered fundamentalism of today,

"I would be a Christian even if there were no hereafter."

And I read a poem. I guess I have always used poetry in my sermons. The poem has a pretty good message, even today, and even for Unitarian Universalists. I do not know the name of the author but it is titled, ~Do Something".

Do something today to bring gladness
To someone whose pleasures are few,
Do something to drive away sadness -
Or cause someone's dream to come true.

Find time for a neighborly greeting
And find time to delight in old friends;
Remember - the years are fleeting
And life's latest day will soon end.

Do something today that tomorrow
Will prove to be really worth while
Help someone to conquer sorrow
And greet the new dawn with a smile -

For only through kindness and giving
Of service and friendship and cheer
We find the pure joy of living
And find heaven's happiness here.

But that was yesterday. This is today. In that yesterday I was a Christian theist. Today I am an atheist! This morning I am an evangelical atheist!

C

Perhaps before I proceed further, I should spend some time with definitions, with the hope that doing so will clarify my position rather than distorting it. The definitions I will be using are a composite of definitions found in my copies of an encyclopedia of philosophy, an encyclopedia of religion and The American Heritage Dictionary.

The word "theism" and "atheism" have historically referred to questions about the existence or non-existence of God. A theist says "there is a god. God does have existence". An atheist says, "there is not a god. God does not have existence." The various definitions of "theism" posits these ideas about God: "a personal being, transcendent who created the world"; "a unitary personal being as the creative force or ground of the physical world. man and values transcendent to nature but eminent in it"; "involved in continuous divine activity". "Monotheism" involves belief in one god whereas "polytheism" holds a belief in several or many gods. I think it will suffice to define "atheism" as the total negation of all ideas such as these.

"Deism" is an abbreviated form of "theism" which accepts the idea of a "transcendent creator of the universe" but insists that after setting it in motion, God abandoned it, assumed no control over life, exerted no influence over natural phenomena, and gave no supernatural revelation."

"Agnosticism", which is derived from the Greek word for "unknown", and first used by Thomas Huxley, suggests that "human beings can have no knowledge of a reality beyond sensual experience." Maybe God exists and maybe God does not exist, but as human beings, limited to human ways of knowing, we can not know which is true. I expect that agnostics fall across a range which includes those who would bet on the existence of God, at one extreme, and those who think that there is not much chance there is a God, at the other extreme. Those "agnostics" who think that the odds for the existence of God resemble those for there being "a snow storm in hell" would probably be called "skeptics".

"Pantheism" which "identifies God with Nature" is the doctrine that the universe, the all of reality, is God. I think the best definition of "pantheism" is found in The Walt Whitman Encyclopedia. Perhaps I think it is the best because I wrote it.

Pantheism involves a belief in the complete identity of God and the world, the ideal that everything is God and God is everything, and the conviction that everything in the universe is sacred. A poetic description of pantheism is found in Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" (1733): "All are but parts of one stupendous whole/whose body Nature is and God the soul."

D

Well, that is enough about definitions. But as I reflect on those definitions it occurs to me that I could have been defined by each one of them at some stage of my religious development.

I began, as I said, as a Christian theist. That stance occupied most of my Methodist years. But as I moved through and out of theological school, I began to question, more and more, the major doctrines of Christianity. I expect that by the time I

became a Unitarian Universalist, I could be described as a "monotheist theist", that is, I believed in the one God who created the world and was active in human experience.

I expect that it was not long, however, before one could describe my theology as "deistic," that is. I still believed in God, but dropped off the 'active in human experience' part. God created the world but was absent from it.

By the time I came to Omaha, thirty years ago - - after the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggle, five children and 40 years of living and learning - - two things were clear to me. In the first place, my theology would have to be defined as "agnostic:" I did not know whether or not there was a god and, furthermore, I did not much care. And secondly, I would not use "god" language. "God" was a meaningless word. In the modern world it had become so saturated with a variety of meanings that no one could tell what another person meant when he or she used the word.

Richard Dawkins, in his book The God Delusion, quotes Steven Weinberg, Nobel prize winning author of Dreams of a Final Theory:

Some people have views of God that are so broad and flexible that it is inevitable that they will find God wherever they look for him. One hears it said that God is the ultimate' or 'God is our better nature' or God is the universe'. Of course, like any word, the word "God" can be given any meaning we like. If you want to say that "God is energy," then you can find God in a lump of coal.

To which Dawkins adds:

Weinberg is surely right that, if the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in a way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is "appropriate for us to worship."

I have long felt that way. We need a common definition of God if we are really to communicate religiously. I have a good friend, a colleague, who shares many of my views. But he both rejects the supernatural, on the one hand, and affirms a belief in God, on the other. I find that totally incomprehensible. I cannot understand it. What value is there in the word "God" when most people who use it assume a supernatural quality to it, something beyond nature, something that created nature, and others do not?

This may be a good place to segue into "polytheism." "The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture," notes Gore Vidal, "is monotheism." I don't know if I would go that far, but it has long seemed to me that the concept of monotheism is inferior to at least one concept of polytheism that is found in several different cultures in the world. That is the idea of two gods - the earth and the sun - with the earth being the feminine principle and the sun being the masculine principle. It took both, and intercourse between them, to generate life on this planet Earth. In that context, monotheism seems sterile and that form of polytheism seems to me to be both fertile and creative.

That image of intercourse between the sun and the earth can carry me into the last of the "god" definitions. "pantheism". With its connotation of nature worship. of marveling at the processes of evolution and of the awesome development of the cosmos, it perhaps, of all others, best defines my theological orientation. I have said repeatedly from this pulpit that biological evolution and cosmic evolution need to exist at the core of any religion valid for the twenty first century. I could call myself a "pantheist." but then there is, right in the midst of the word, "theism" with its connotation of a supernatural or extranatural, if there is such a word, force that animates the world and the universe. And I reject that. I have the same problem with one of the dominant themes of Unitarian Universalism, "naturalistic theism." it seems to me to be not only an incomprehensible concept but also an incompatible use of words. "Naturalism" and "theism" seem to be to be conflicting and contrary ideas. For that reason, I prefer the term "naturalism" or "naturalistic humanism" to define what I believe

I have come to the conclusion that in many ways all of these definitions -- deism, agnosticism. pantheism. naturalistic theism are cop-outs. I know they are all cop-outs for me and I expect they are for many in our denomination. Before today, if people asked me whether or not I believe in God, I would hedge. I might have said that God is something like an equation: if God is love, then love is God. Or I might have said, "it depends upon what one means by the word "god," which now strikes me as absurd. God either means something or it means nothing. From this day forward it will be a simple answer: "no." And then, hopefully, one can have a meaningful interaction with the questioner.

Bertrand Russell in Why I am Not a Christian wrote: "the immense majority of intellectually eminent men disbelieve in Christian religion, but they conceal the fact in public, because they are afraid of losing their incomes." I am not sure about the "losing their incomes" part, but I do think there is a lot of truth to what Bertrand Russell had to say. People conceal the fact that they reject the doctrines of Christianity, or have doubts about the existence of God because they are afraid of confrontation: confrontation with family, confrontation with organized religion, confrontation with the 90 percent of the American population who, according to recent studies, apparently know little about religion but insist they believe in the existence of God.

But it is time, or past time, for confrontation. It is time for me to come out of the closet and proclaim my atheism. By God, it is time for liberal religion to come out of the closet and say "NO!" to the idea of God. I, for one, am glad that that coterie of scholars called the "new atheist" are making the best seller lists. God is such a divisive force in the world that, although I don't agree with everything they have to say, it is time that I cast my lot with them.

E

The comedian George Carlin notes:

Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man - living in the sky who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And this invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and choke and scream and cry for ever and ever `til the end of time ... but he loves you!

I know that most of us. and perhaps even most Christians, do not believe that, but there are millions and millions who do.

I have preached on a couple occasions at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Topeka, Kansas. Every Sunday across the street from the church is a group of ultra conservative Baptists with signs proclaiming "God hates Fags". I am sure most Baptists do not believe this, but tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, do.

"God has spoken to me. I listen to God and what I've heard is that I'm supposed to devote myself to rebuilding the conservative base of the Republican Party." Those words were uttered by the thoroughly discredited politician, Tom Delay, just months ago, June 4th, 2007. It used to be that when people said God spoke to them, they might be considered "certifiable," but now it has become, for politicians at least, standard operating procedure.

In a world where people are willing to use their bodies as bombs to blow up other people in the name of God; in a time when the president of the United States apparently believes that it is God's will that we wage this immoral and stupid war in Iraq; in a time when it is possible that we might have another president whose God tells him that evolution is wrong; in a country, founded on religious freedom, where candidates for public office have to pretend piety in order to get elected ; in a time when the treatment and care of many poor people, the drug addicted, the mentally ill and the imprisoned, are relegated to so called "faith based organizations" not for the primary purpose of recovery, education and rehabilitation but one of the converting people to particular ideas about God; in a time when "big" religion and "big" money combine to buy election: in a time when anything and everything - even the most horrendous of events - can be seen as God's will: it is time for thoughtful and liberal people to stand up and say, "ENOUGH ALREADY!" The idea of God, the idea that there are cosmic sanctions for anything, is so divisive, so destructive, that it serves no valuable purpose in the modern world.

Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberals have spent decades, maybe centuries, trying to redeem the idea of God, attempting to clothe God in new garments compatible with modern and scientific thought, and it has gotten us nowhere. It is time we realized that the idea of a God has outlived its usefulness. It is time for us to `boldly go where no man has gone before" - where no man or woman has gone before - and admit to ourselves that God has got to go!

F

And that is where I stand today. I am an atheist. And, as I said earlier, I am an evangelical atheist. The various definitions of "evangel" found in the dictionary contain words like "good news" and "glad tidings." The word itself- "evangel" - is derived from the Greek "good messenger." There is a good message here. And that good message in the 21st century, is not coming from theologians. It is not coming from ancient sacred scriptures. It is not dependent upon a god concept. It comes from the scientist who are unfolding, even now, a more awesome and wonderful universe than the ancient world ever knew.

Albert Einstein, perhaps the greatest scientist of the 20th century, who defined himself as a "deeply religious nonbeliever," wrote:

I have never imputed to nature a purpose or a goal, or anything that could be understood as anthropomorphic. What I see in nature is a magnificent structure that we can comprehend only very imperfectly, and must fill a thinking person with a feeling of humility. This is a genuine religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism.

Although Einstein never thought of himself as an atheist, and was, in fact, critical of what today I am calling "evangelical atheists," I feel he is someone I consider a fellow traveler. He goes on to write:

Strange is our situation here on earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, there is one thing we do know: that man is here for the sake of other men - above all for those upon whose smiles and well-being our own happiness depends.

I love that phrase "seeming to divine a purpose" with its connotation of the sacred, but also of the divining rod. Seeking a purpose. Creating a purpose. Discovering a purpose. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins dismisses the value in understanding that religion seems to be universal. The common cold is also universal, he suggests, but that does not mean that it is good. It seems to me that the universal need for religion is something much more profound. It seems to me that there is something in the human psyche that demands that we "divine a purpose," that we come up with something - that we discover something, that we create something - that places our lives, and the lives of our fellow human beings, in the context of cosmos.

Carl Sagan, in Pale Blue Planet, wrote:

How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, "This is much better than we thought! The universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant"?

Instead they say "No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way." A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.

This is where I take my stand. If we can - if the human race can - find a way to say "no, no, no" to the conventional faiths, and to the conventional gods, we can then say "yes, yes, yes," in reverence and awe, to a natural world as we now know it, a world where all human beings are members of one family, a world where all living things are interrelated, if we can - if the human race can - say "no, no, no" to the conventional faiths, and the conventional gods, we can say "yes, yes, yes" to an unfolding universe from which we have come and to which we shall return, a universe of oneness.

That universe has been wonderfully described in poetry of one of my eminent predecessors in the Omaha pulpit, Robert Weston.

Out of the stars in their flight,
 out of the dust of eternity,
 here have we come,
Stardust and sunlight, mingling
 through time and through space

Out of the stars have we come.
 up from time;
Out of the stars have we come.

Time out of time, before time
 in the vastness of space,
 earth spun to orbit the sun,
Earth with the thunder of mountains
 new born, the boiling sea.

Earth warmed by sun, lit by sunlight:
 this is our home;
Out of the stars have we come.

Mystery hidden in mystery,
 back through all time;
Mystery rising from rocks
 in the storm and the sea.

Out of the stars,
 rising from rocks and the sea
Kindled by sunlight on earth
 arose life.

Ponder this thing in your heart;
ponder with awe:
Out of the sea to the land.
out of the shallows came ferns.

Out of the sea to the land,
up from darkness to light,
Rising to walk and to fly,
out of the sea trembled life~

Ponder this thing in your heart.
life up from the sea
Eyes to behold, throats to sing,
mates to love.

Life from the sea, warmed by sun,
washed by rain,
Life from within, giving birth
rose to love.

This is the wonder of time;
this is the wonder of space;
Out of the stars swung the earth;
life upon earth rose to love.

This is the marvel of life,
rising to see and to know;
Out of your heart, cry wonder:
sing that we live.