

“no god(goddess)”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, April 5, 2007
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, VA

Opening Words

Albert Einstein said:

I am a deeply religious nonbeliever. This is a somewhat new kind of religion.

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 that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of humility. This is a genuinely religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism.

The idea of a personal God is quite alien to me and seems even naïve.

(quoted in Dawkins, Richard, The God Delusion, p. 15.)

I began last Sunday’s sermon on “god(goddess)” by saying “I am a religious naturalist and I have to tell you...that you need to be aware of my starting place as I speak of god. Inevitably [my bias] will have an effect upon where I wind up.” That is no less true in a sermon on any religious belief except one: atheism. That is because there is no logical inconsistency between religious naturalism and atheism.

Atheism does not claim that things are anything but what they appear to be. It does not set up any view of the world that is inaccessible to anyone who is not a believer. It plays no favorites, honors no one belief more than others because of the weight of thousands of years of tradition, offers no special rights by dint of belief, power, heritage, architecture, scripture, secret teaching, reward or punishment, hopefulness or fear.

If anything, atheism is the belief that fears to pronounce its own name. In America, it can be argued that a person of any faith could now be elected to public office—except atheists. When have you heard any politician say he was an atheist? Congress has members of every organized religion in America, even Islam.

A Muslim Congressman was elected to the House of Representatives last year for the first time and he asked to take his oath of office on a Quran. There was a huge uproar from right wingers. One, Dennis Prager, proclaimed that “if Keith Ellison is allowed to [do] that, he will be doing more damage to the unity of America and to the value system that has formed this country than the terrorists of 9-11.” Congressman Ellison, a progressive Democrat and Muslim who endorsed religious liberty for everyone, used the self-proclaimed Unitarian Thomas Jefferson’s Quran to take his ceremonial oath of office. No buildings fell down.

Nothing in the U.S. Constitution requires members of Congress to take the oath of office on a holy book of any sort. Article VI specifically forbids religious tests for public office. In the official swearing-in for all members of Congress, no religious texts of any kind are used. The tradition of being sworn in on a Bible is only for photo ops.

But if a Congressman announced that he was not going to be sworn in on any religious scripture because he was an atheist, the uproar would wash away all the criticism of the Muslim congressman. To be an atheist is to claim the one forbidden faith in America. Most atheists don't call themselves that. They say they are agnostics. That sounds as if they may be on the edge of believing something.

Or not disbelieving. Atheists make the most humble of claims. They simply don't believe in anything because it is fashionable or popular, expected or taken for granted. They have the temerity to say "No. I don't believe in any of that. I don't need god to make me feel okay about life, about myself. The world is just what it is." That would be absolutely terrifying to most people, according to polls. So most atheists just keep their mouths shut. It goes better that way.

There's a new organization for atheists called "The Brights Community." They say that

- A bright is a person who has a naturalistic worldview;
- A bright's worldview is free of supernatural and mystical elements;
- The ethics and actions of a bright are based on a naturalistic worldview.

That's all they require, but it's a powerful idea that draws together a diverse body of people. On their website the Brights say

The constituency of Brights is hugely diverse. Besides those who self-identify as atheist, humanist, secular humanist, freethinker, rationalist, naturalist, agnostic, or skeptic, there are individuals who go by their preferred affiliations, such as Ethical Culturalist, Pantheist, Buddhist, Yogi, Wiccan, Transhumanist, or Unitarian.

Also part of the gamut of constituents are Jews, Catholics, Quakers, Episcopalians, and others who may personally maintain their religion's cultural or aesthetic aspects, but not its supernaturalism

There are professors of religious studies and clergy in and out of practice who are Brights (e.g., Unitarian-Universalist ministers, Protestant pastors, even one ex-Benedictine monk). Not all constituents associate themselves with familiar groupings or labels. The movement's goals attract all sorts of people who "have a naturalistic worldview" and favor thinking of themselves broadly and in a civic sense, as *Brights*.

However most of these people are closet atheists. The new label of "Brights" allows them to fly under the radar, as it were, of America's religious arbiters, those folks who insist that one cannot really be an atheist (which is another way of saying "you should not claim to be an atheist.")

Here's how the argument usually goes. "You have to believe something to exist. Ergo, you are a theist. That which you believe in is your god." Or "The god you don't believe in is probably a god I don't believe in either. The real god isn't these little images or names that people use to speak of god. You're just like us." Or "It's all right for you not to claim god. After all 'god' is a word that we use to speak of the ultimate, or of a life spirit within people. I know you believe in that."

"No, yes" says the self-conscious atheist. "I really mean it. I don't believe in any of that or disbelieve in any of that, and those specious arguments won't convince me that I am just the same as

religionists. I am an atheist. I don't believe in anything supernatural. I'm satisfied that the world is what it is, and I take responsibility for my own value judgments."

Then the atheist may go on to honor some part of the ethical heritage that she is comfortable with, and she may disappear into the background like a wily species that knows that it is safer not to go around in plain sight. She has learned that there are lots of hunters about—people of various religions who would dearly love to bag an atheist. Atheists have to watch out. It can be dangerous to proclaim one's identity when it is so threatening to others.

The spectacle of what is called religion, or at any rate organized religion...has filled me with horror [said an internationally honored political figure who was an atheist] and I have frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition, exploitation and the preservation of vested interests. (p. 45, The God Delusion)

That was the atheist Nehru speaking, stimulated no doubt by the multitude of gods that populate the religions of India. One cannot imagine a political leader in America making such a forthright statement. When the Unitarian Adlai Stevenson ran for President he frequently attended the Unitarian Church in Deerfield, Illinois which I later served as minister. I don't know what his beliefs about god were but he couldn't have made that statement without dooming his candidacy though I suspect it reflected his views too. He joined a Presbyterian Church for a short time though he clearly disbelieved its dogma. The pastor was a friend who didn't make demands of him, and he needed to appear religious to run for President.

It is astounding that a blatantly atheistic book like The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins could hover in the top five non-fiction books on the best seller list as it has for the last six months. There must be a lot of closet atheists out there—or at least people who are starting to listen to them.

Dawkins has little good to say about agnosticism. In this book the Oxford evolutionary biologist says "there is nothing wrong with being agnostic in cases where we lack evidence one way or the other. It is the reasonable position," (p. 46, TGD) pointing to Carl Sagan who he said was proud to be agnostic when asked whether there was life elsewhere in the universe. "Really, it's okay to reserve judgment until the evidence is in." "How about the question of God?" Dawkins asks.

Many have said definitely yes, often with an air of conviction that verges on protesting too much. Are they right? I'll begin [said Dawkins] by distinguishing two kinds of agnosticism. TAP, or Temporary Agnosticism in Practice, is the legitimate fence-sitting where there really is a definite answer, one way or the other, but we so far lack the evidence to reach it.... But there is also a deeply inescapable kind of fence-sitting, which I shall call PAP (Permanent Agnosticism in Principle)....

The PAP style of agnosticism is appropriate for questions that can never be answered, no matter how much evidence we gather, because the very idea of evidence is not applicable. The question exists on a different plane, or in a different dimension, beyond the zones where evidence can reach. An example might be...the question whether you see red as I do. Maybe your red is my green, or something completely different from any colour that I can imagine....

The view that I shall defend [he said] is very different: agnosticism about the existence of God belongs firmly in the temporary or TAP category. Either he exists or he doesn't. It is a scientific question; one day we may know the answer, and meanwhile we can say something pretty strong about the probability. (pp. 47-48 TGD)

Dawkins then went on in an article titled "Why there almost certainly is no god," in *The Huffington Post* (10/23/2006) to say

Not only do we need no God to explain the universe and life. God stands out in the universe as the most glaring of all superfluous sore thumbs. We cannot, of course, disprove God, just as we can't disprove Thor, fairies, leprechauns and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. But, like those other fantasies that we can't disprove, we can say that God is very very improbable.

Richard Dawkins proceeds to dismantle every conceivable argument for god, but he would not be credible to those who feel god in their gut, for religion is not an intellectual game. For those committed to a faith it becomes a part of themselves beyond the reach of argument. It is a way of justifying unfairness, and of providing hope where reason gives none for people who want the comfort of eternity in their lives, rather than the fleeting existence that we all see. I commend Dawkins' book to anyone who wants to participate in the dialogue about god's existence, but it would take far too long to trot out all his arguments. Ultimately they would be unconvincing to those whose god moves within them and who live that god.

I'm going to stop a little early today to invite you into the dialogue here and now. What do you think about the existence of god, or of a god, or of an ultimate source for life's meaning? What does the quality of life say to you? How do you answer the questions?

Next week I'll tell you "Why God Won't Go Away," no matter what the claims are on one side or the other. Neuroscience is beginning to show us that the experience of spirituality is hard-wired into the brain, or at least into some brains. That neither proves nor disproves the existence of god. It only shows how it is that human beings have the experiences that they interpret with the answer of god.

Dick Weston-Jones

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

1710 Old NC 10, Hillsborough, NC 27278, www.uuchnc.org, 919-644-0567