

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
“Faitheist”

February 1, 2015 Samuel A. Trumbore

**Sermon**

The term “faitheist” was intended as a slur directed to Chris Stedman, today, the author of a book with that word as its title, and Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University. He was called a faitheist after he attended a public discussion on religion when he was a student in Chicago. The subject of the discussion was how non-theistic people should approach religion. At the time, he was serving as an intern for Interfaith Youth Core, an organization that mobilizes “young people to change the public narrative on religion from one of conflict to one of cooperation by engaging in dialogue around shared values and cooperative action.” This is the group that was started by Eboo Patel, a Muslim interfaith activist. At that time, Stedman would say about himself, “Hey, I work with religious people every day and my atheism is stronger than ever.”

During the public discussion, however, religion and religious people were mocked, criticized, denied and rejected. The participants couldn’t see anything useful that might come from the religious community. Better if those crazy religionists would just fold up their tents and disappear.

It was at the post-event party at a swanky apartment in an upscale part of town that he met his antagonist. While sipping expensive wine and sampling exotic hors-d'oeuvres, chatting with a couple and suggesting that religion might have some redeeming value to atheists, the man dismissed him with a sneer saying, “Oh, I get it. You’re one of *those* atheists. You’re not a *real* atheist. We’ve got a name for people like you. You’re a ‘faitheist.’ There’s nothing worse than a faitheist.”

Stedman had seen this kind of intolerance before when he was an evangelical Christian as a teen. He’d found a loving and accepting church youth group that worked really well for him ... until he began to recognize his sexual attraction didn’t match the other boys around him. Looking at a picture of an attractive heterosexual couple, his eyes focused on the man rather than the woman. When he realized his interest and attraction was different than what the church taught, he immediately knew he had a big

problem. And he tried every way he had read about in his Christian teen magazines to fix it. He threw himself into fasting and praying the gay away.

It didn't work. God just wouldn't change his desires even though he tried very, very hard over a couple of years to change his sexual orientation. When he finally saw the error of rejecting this rather fixed identity is when he began to become a militant atheist.

It was his experience of working with Interfaith Youth Core in college that moved him out of the militant atheist ranks. Meeting and getting to know people of different faiths who were very good, moral, caring people began to soften his rigid rejection of religion. Even though he didn't share their faith, he wanted to be around them because he found them to be admirable people with a strong commitment to the Youth Core values that they both shared.

Most militant atheists resist the invitation to engage in this kind of dialogue with religious believers. The conversation they would rather have is a debate that would allow them to demolish the believer's faith with reason. Through compelling logical argument, they would then liberate the believer from their delusional captivity to superstition. The newly enlightened religionist would then discard their archaic faith and join the atheist's 21<sup>st</sup> century freedom from faith, and the errors of their old ways. These militant atheists would proclaim there is no need for any reference to supernaturalism to live a whole and complete life. The world would be a far better place if religion was eliminated from the face of the earth.

I've labeled this perspective which is common in the non-believing world, 'militant atheism' to distinguish it from other kinds of non-belief. This militant perspective has been around a very long time dating back to the times of Greece and Rome, perhaps before that. More recently they've been represented by the likes of Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. They see religion as a malevolent force that threatens humankind. They perceive religion as false and dangerous, needing deconstruction with the tools of reason and science. Their unhidden agenda is 'anti-theism,' the rejection and eventual elimination of religion from society. Dawkins has called religion, the "root of all evil." Hitchens provocative book title states his case, "God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything." What I find telling about their arguments is how familiar they sound ... in a different set of mouths. If you exchange

the words 'religion' and 'God' with 'secularism' and 'atheism,' in their arguments, you'll get a close approximation to the views of *religious fundamentalists*.

There is, however, a softer atheism, closer to Stedman's kind that you'll find far more common within Unitarian Universalist circles. Rather than exclusionary of religion, they see themselves as one of a diverse set of faith perspectives. Rather than rejecting God and wanting to stamp out the idea, they just are not persuaded, and probably never will be persuaded, about the existence of God. It is more of a diversity thing. Some of us believe and others do not ... and both perspectives are okay.

A distinguishing characteristic of softer atheists is how they order and create meaning in their lives. They question the assertion that the world is just a meaningless, random process driven by selfish genes competing to replicate themselves while beating back natural selection. They wonder if the survival of the fittest should be used as a governing principle of human life. They are drawn to dialogue about whether there are greater purposes and principles operating here. They are interested in prophetic claims that these purposes and principles were put in place and/or guided by a divine process that gives our lives meaning when we cooperate with them. A soft atheist might say, "Science and reason are great for building human infrastructure and governing human society but may be a bit thin for providing satisfying meaning that stands up well to the punishment of the human condition."

This kind of atheist would approach engagement with religious leaders and their beliefs using the methods of interfaith dialogue. When religious leaders engage in this form of dialogue, they do not try to convert each other. When I meet with an Imam, a Catholic priest, and a rabbi, (of course in a bar ready to set up a joke) my goal isn't to bring them all around to the wisdom of Unitarian Universalism. We begin the dialogue agreeing to disagree. What we seek in the exchange is an enriching encounter that will expand our understanding and appreciation of each other's religious views. We are likely to encounter similar values but buttressed by dissimilar religious beliefs. We can agree to shun violence and practice loving kindness and charity but from different ethical foundations. We can offer gratitude but to very different deities – and the case of the atheist, offer gratitude for those near and dear to us, for community, for humanity, for the web of life, for being itself. We can feel very grateful without needing a divine being to receive it.

So what might an atheist appreciate that has a religious source? Just about every piece of art before the nineteenth century much of which include religious content, that's what! Beautiful churches, temples, mosques and cathedrals were built with the sweat, blood and tears of generations of artisans inspired by and in the service to God. Libraries of music have been composed to stimulate religious feeling and lift up the hearts of the people in the pews. Bach's famous B minor mass begins with the choir singing, "Kyrie eleison," "Lord, have mercy on us." Christian rock pounds out the message of Jesus with guitars and drums. Ancient sculptors seek to capture the dramatic moments in scripture that have more universal, non-Christian appeal. Art and religion remain so deeply intertwined that one would almost have to reject art to reject religion. The atheist can easily take in all this beauty without also needing to accept the theology. Timeless art speaks a language far greater than doctrine and catechism.

The history of religious thought documents the evolution of the moral and ethical framework that forms the foundation of society. The law that guides resolving conflicts and elevating common interests came from the distillation of core values discerned from and discovered in religious teachings.

And when the way is hard and the path is long, religion can be a source of support and consolation. Many studies have demonstrated the value of religion, not just for supporting our mental health but also providing practices to strengthen our bodies and fortify our spirits.

In short, religion offers a gold mine of tradition, culture, beliefs, and practices that an atheist might appropriate for more secular purposes. I don't have to be a Buddhist to practice mindfulness meditation and gain tremendous benefit. I don't need to be a Hindu to practice yoga. Remember that so much of the early science was done to know God and celebrate God's creative power. It was only when the discoveries began to conflict with scripture that the trouble started. We don't reject all that science because it was done for a religious purpose, to glorify God.

Of all that religion has to offer, one of the biggest barriers is the word faith. The atheist isn't about to take anything on faith that reason cannot supply supplemental support. Religion may discover something ex nihilo, revealed through the mind of a saint or prophet, but if reason cannot validate its truth, it is useless to the atheist.

Yet the mathematician Gödel proved that there do exist propositions that are true that could not be logically deduced from the mathematical system used to validate them. To put it another way, it is possible that there are truths that cannot be proven with the use of reason.

A source I used putting together my words for this morning was a book by Bruce Sheiman titled, *An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity is Better Off with Religion than without it*. If you want a more detailed exploration of my topic today, I recommend his book.

What I find in his and Stedman's work is an atheist conviction but with an almost sanguine regret that the door of belief in God is closed to them. The richness of thought, culture and tradition attracts them yet they must filter and translate to extract the value they find. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I deeply empathize with their struggle. I must do the same thing to import meaning and values from other religious traditions that inform and inspire my work, writing and public speaking.

Both atheists and Unitarian Universalists are in the process of building a new way to celebrate human values independent of belief or unbelief. This non-creedal, free-thinking approach is very new and fresh on the cultural scene.>>>

Yet 100, 200 or 1000 years from now, people may be looking back to us as visionaries of how to build a pluralistic society and avoid endless religious wars. We are at the beginning of something that no one person or prophet is likely to shape – it will be a collective effort that will evolve along its own independent path.

Its current incarnation Alain de Botton called 'Atheism 2.0,' a kinder, gentler version of atheism. Perhaps we'll look back on this period also as Unitarian Universalism 2.0. We'll see.

What we can have confidence in, as the foundation of our faith, is that no one religion has all the answers or all the truth ... and that includes those who reject religion. Valuable as the atheist critique of religion is, they are much too willing to throw the baby Jesus out of his manger along with the bath water.

Chris Stedman has a great story about his youthful self-righteousness his mother likes to retell. At a birthday party as a child, his ecstatic younger cousin ran up to him, his

face covered in pink and orange and green saying, “Isn’t my birthday ice cream so good?!” To which Stedman replied without a pause, “It isn’t ice cream, Alex. It’s sherbet.” He continues:

In my youth, being “right” held ultimacy. I valued precision and accuracy, and was sure to correct anyone I felt was “wrong.” I thought I was doing people a favor by correcting them. Now, I strive to lead with listening rather than lecturing.

We can be dogmatically fixated on who is “right” and who is “wrong,” or we can discern a way to live together in tension and ambiguity. Joining forces, we can buck the clash-of-civilizations story that has come to define our world ... and dictate a new narrative—one that bridges the religious and the secular, rather than threatening the “other” with extinction.

To these words, I’ll add my own, amen.

## **Benediction**

Again, I recommend that 2011 TED talk by Alain de Botton to you. Here are his final words:

... my concluding point is you may not agree with religion, but at the end of the day, religions are so subtle, so complicated, so intelligent in many ways that they're not fit to be abandoned to the religious alone; they're for all of us.

And especially for Unitarian Universalists since they are part of our heritage.

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