

## Thank God for Atheists (A Sermon)

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Northumberland, PA  
January 12, 2014

Non-belief has been around a long time, but nevertheless atheists are supposedly among the most reviled people in America. Pew Research Center research tells us that in 2003 that half of Americans would hesitate to vote for an atheist candidate. Nevertheless, atheists are one of the fastest growing belief groups in the country. In 2013 2.4% of Americans identify as atheist, up from 1.6% in 2007. These statistics are far from straightforward, however. 7% of Americans say they don't believe in God, even though only a third of those claim the label "atheist." Meanwhile, 5% of those calling themselves atheists *do* believe in God, and a quarter of atheists think of themselves as spiritual.

And, as if to add insult to injury (for some), atheists and agnostics as a group scored highest on their knowledge about everyone else's religious beliefs. Oh, the irony.

All this is to say that many atheists don't fit popular stereotypes. In their recent TV interview, Oprah initially could not believe that Diana Nyad, the first person confirmed to have swum from Cuba to Florida without a shark cage, could be an "atheist in awe." Nyad started off by saying she "wasn't a God person." Oprah asked Nyad point-blank if she was an atheist, as if expecting a denial. When the response was embrace of the term, Oprah asked if Nyad were a "spiritual person" as if the question was subversive. But by the end of their interview, they seem to have found a middle ground – they agreed that God is not a bearded guy in the sky, that nature is awesome in the true sense, that humans have souls.

I'm always surprised when believers are surprised to find they have so much in common with atheists. And I'm always disturbed when believers assume this must mean those people aren't *really* atheists after all, as if *they* are the best people to decide how to define other peoples' faith.

But perhaps this is old hat to me. I've spent my entire adult life living in spaces where belief meets non-belief, and I think this has enriched me immensely. My husband and I have an interfaith marriage. We agree on a lot. We both prefer new board games to new clothes, both worry about energy efficiency and recycling, and both like zombie movies. But, we disagree on this issue of God. We always have. It's not as big a deal as some seem to think.

I grew up United Methodist, thinking I would be a minister (as well as President and a Noble Prize winner). I left that church over issues like gay marriage and whether God was really male. My husband, on the other hand, is an atheist. Not the kind of atheist who actively rejects the religion of their youth, blaming God for the injustices of Sunday school bullies or those family divisions written in the language of religion (although those are also totally valid reasons to become an atheist, too). My husband was raised as an atheist. He never attended church. He came to college thinking that church was a total waste of time. (Obviously, he's changed his mind, since he's here watching me deliver this sermon today.)

In college, we treated each other's beliefs as quirks, largely irrelevant on a campus where few students attended church and deep philosophical discussions about the nature of the universe were the order of the day. I flirted with disbelief, playing at being an atheist, the same way I flirted with vegetarianism and majoring in geology. But I could never quite believe it. My ideas about God have shifted – from He to It, from One to All, from Here to There and Back Again – but I couldn't let go of the idea of a Something. I've learned to accept that about myself. I need a Something.

But I also need my husband. He reminds me, just by his presence, that I might be wrong. And that's a good thing. I think all religious people should see the existence of atheists as a good thing. Not merely as people to be acknowledged or tolerated, but as an important part of the religious world.

It makes me sad that so many view atheism as a problem, a fly in the ointment. They believe that atheists spend all their energy preventing people from praying with schoolchildren or removing nativity scenes from parks or changing the Cold War “In God We Trust” catch-phrase on our currency. They think atheists lack morality. Atheists must be confused or damaged. They must need to be converted through sustained loving conversation, or by throwing them into foxholes. These people think atheists can't feel awe. Atheists, for many, are a problem to be solved.

But I say, “Thank God for Atheists.”

I may believe that God created the world, or perhaps created the process that created the world (forgive me, I'm a deistic pagan. Is that a thing?). And if people are as they are *divinely* – then atheists are as much a part of God's creation as any other being. What if God created people who refuse to believe in It – in fact, cannot believe in It – intentionally?

No doubt many atheists would think that sounds ridiculous. My husband certainly does. And that's a beautiful thing.

I may need a Something. But I also need the possibility that I am wrong.

What happens if I am wrong, and atheists are right? No God, no final reckoning. No afterlife where God elevates the peacemakers – or, if you prefer the Monty Python version, the cheesemakers – or anyone else. The last will never be made first. No God to sort out whether I treated my neighbor well enough, whether I tithed sufficiently. No God to punish me for my sex life or swearing too much or putting cheese on hamburgers. No God to reward me for attending church or reading holy books or feeding the hungry. No God to give eternal reward to those who suffered on Earth.

Some claim that without God, there is no morality. But atheists instead tell us that without God, there is no excuse. No excuse for inaction, for apathy. We *can* choose to ignore the poor, let children starve, pollute the environment, and allow discrimination to rob the potential of our youth. It's our choice, but we will never transcend it. We will never enter a heaven full of asexual harp players free from structural inequalities and material wants. We'll just live our lives in a fractured, tragic world, and then die, knowing that *this* is the only inheritance we have left to the next generation.

No wonder atheism is so frightening to so many. Where does a mere mortal begin to even think about fixing the world?

And yet, one of the clearest mandates of religion to believing mortals is to get on with exactly that. Fix the world yourself. At least *try*. And if that is what believers think they are being told to do, why should be it so strange that there are people who agree with the goal, without believing it comes from God?

Many atheists are trying to make the world a little better, not running around telling everyone else what not to believe. Some are even founding churches! The “Sunday Assembly” is an atheist mega-church started in the U.K. and now also in Los Angeles and elsewhere in the U.S. Founder Sanderson Jones stated:

“If you think about church, there's very little that's bad. It's singing awesome songs, hearing interesting talks, thinking about improving yourself and helping other people — and doing that in a community with wonderful relationships. What part of that is not to like?”

Exactly! UUs beat you to it, but it's ok. It's a big world, and there's room for all of us.

And yet as atheists carve out a space to believe in Church even though they don't believe in God, some still seem shocked by their presence. Consider the surprise of Wolf Blitzer at finding an atheist in Oklahoma. Not a middle-aged angry man selling his latest screed against believers, but a young mother with her toddler son in her arms and her obliterated house behind her. When asked – twice – whether she “Thanked the Lord” for escaping the tornado that destroyed her home, Rebecca Vitsmun smiled and almost apologetically – apologetically in the sense that she had inadvertently caught Blitzer with his foot in his mouth – answered, “I'm actually an atheist.” After she and Blitzer laughed off the awkwardness of his *faux pas*, she added, “but I wouldn't blame anyone for thanking the Lord.”

What a gracious response. How different from the atheists we usually see highlighted in the media – those who suggest that belief is a product of ignorance, that faith is a product of childishness, that religion is the root of violence and sexism and evil. Instead we see here the idea that faith simply *is*, even as we place it in different things. Rebecca didn't pray to God – but I hope she *did* have faith in her neighbors, in her insurance policy, in FEMA, in her own good sense to get out of her collapsing house. She certainly could have faith in the atheist community, who in response to her impromptu comments raised \$125,000 to help rebuild her house.

Those of us who do pray to a God hopefully have some faith left over to do those sorts of things too.

I think many religious people would do better to embrace Rebecca's gracious atheism, and to return it. To be able to state, in all humility, in all seriousness: “Well, I believe in God. But I wouldn't blame anyone for *not* believing.” To be sure that God is so big, so loving, that It really doesn't care if people believe in It or not – or even created some, on purpose, not to believe.

Some people think that atheists need to be saved, but I don't believe in a petty God who would send people to hell for being as It created them to be. (Even if hell did exist, which clearly it doesn't. *Obviously*.) Perhaps believers should instead wonder whether atheists are actually here to save *them* – to save believers from taking belief too seriously, too literally. To save us from focusing on seeing images of divinity rather than on hearing divine calls to action. To save us from arguing amongst ourselves about doctrinal details, when we should be uniting to treat our neighbors as ourselves. To remind us about our shared priorities in the here and now, priorities that should exist with or without a God.

So no, I don't worry about my husband's immortal soul. I don't want to convert him. I never asked him to pretend he will raise his children in the light of God, not even for the single afternoon of our wedding. I want to live my life with him as he is. I want him to teach his children what he believes to be true.

That's why I married him. Because he is an atheist. And a great cook.

And now, my son tells me he doesn't believe in God, either. When I explain what the word "atheist" means, he confidently declares, "I'm an atheian!"

And what else can I say, but: Thank God!