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United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

November 13, 2011

Atheism and Agnosticism

(Eighth in series, Contemporary Issues in Religion and Morality)

Psalm 14a; Exodus 3:13-15; Isaiah 55:8,9; Romans 1:18-23 NRSV

Basic to the Christian confession is belief in a Supreme Being who is actively involved in the world. This rudimentary faith is called monotheism and it is shared by at least two other well known world religions, Judaism and Islam. To believe in more than one God is polytheism but that idea seems a bit of an oxymoron to me. If by definition God is the Supreme Being then there can be only one. To believe in more than one God would really be not to believe in God at all. But be that as it may, the idea of theism is that God is a personal being, that is, God is not any inanimate thing or things nor just some sort of vague force or forces as in, the force be with you! God has force but not dumb force. The force of God is guided by the creative intelligent love of a divine person who is regularly engaged with the world. This is who the Bible reveals God to be and belief in this God is called theism.

Atheism on the other hand is the belief (and I think we shall see that it is a belief just as theism is a belief), atheism is the belief that there is no Supreme Being who has a personality and who interacts with the world. A few doors down from atheism (or up depending on your point of view), is agnosticism, which takes the position of not knowing whether God exists or not.

To help, perhaps, further distinguish the point, consider also the term deism. Deism is the belief that there is a God but that God is not active in the world. Deism was especially popular with some of the intellectual set of the 18th and 19th centuries. Since deists believe in the existence of God they are not exactly atheists, but they are not theists either. They do not believe in the God of the Bible. A lot more is being asserted by the monotheistic religions than just God's existence.

Over the years in other cultures the term atheist has been used to denote anyone opposed to the official religion and theology of the time. As a result many people and groups were identified as atheists who really were not. Consider this accusation.

How can people not be in every way impious and atheistic who have apostatized (given up the faith) from the customs of our ancestors through which every nation and city is sustained...what else are they than fighters against God? (religion facts)

That was an accusation leveled against third century Christians in Rome by the Neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry. One of the official charges against ancient Christians was that of atheism. To many Roman minds, if you did not believe in the Roman pantheon of gods and in the divine nature of Caesar, then you did not believe in God and were an atheist. You were also then guilty by implication of sedition because it was respect and obeisance to the Roman gods that the Romans believed brought blessing and success to Rome.

It was not until the scientific age came to bloom in the 19th century that the idea of there being no God of any sort at all was even conceivable. Prior to that time everything was understood to be so grounded in supernatural influences as for God's existence to be taken absolutely for granted, the thought of there not being a God would simply never occur. But with scientific understanding of the physical world came doubts for some about the existence of the spiritual world. And so the atheism grew which not only denies the reality of the God of the Bible but also the reality of any supernatural existence at all.

In our generation the hand of the atheist has been further strengthened by recent destructive behavior that has been credited to religion. Although that which is at fault is only bad religion, since the 9/11 atrocities even true religion has been taking it on the chin. Contemporary atheists include Daniel Dennett, professor of philosophy at Tufts University, who wrote *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, (2006), and Sam Harris, a philosopher who wrote *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* in 2004 and *Letter to a Christian Nation* in (2006). Harris started writing *The End of Faith* on September 12, 2001 which fact itself might give us a glimpse into his thinking. (Investigating Atheism) Another name you might recognize is Christopher Hitchens, a journalist and literary critic whom I have heard referenced to as the angry atheist and who wrote in 2007 the book entitled *God is Not Great: The Case Against Religion*. These men and others are attempting to use a combination of scientific understanding, reason, and destructive religious behavior to make a case against God today. Surely it is the responsibility of Christian pulpits to point out their errors the best we can.

So what do we respond to those who on the basis of science, reason, and bad behavior blamed on religion, contend that the God of the Bible is not real. I think we can say at least three things. One, some ideas about God **should** be rejected. Two, atheism is a faith just like theism is a faith. And three, God is not a product of $e=mc^2$.

Yes, some ideas about God **should** be rejected, and if they are not then I would wish to be an atheist too. Karen Armstrong, in a book entitled, *A History of God* writes, "Those of us who have had a difficult time with religion in the past find it liberating to be rid of the God who terrorized our childhood. It is wonderful not to have to cower before a vengeful deity, who threatens us with eternal damnation if we do not abide by his rules. We have a new intellectual freedom and can boldly follow up our ideas without pussyfooting around difficult articles of faith, feeling all the time a sinking loss of integrity." (Armstrong, p. 378) Yes, the notion of God as a strict, judging, punishing,

rule making, angry, aloof old man on a throne who just makes us feel guilty all the time should be rejected. That God does not exist. And the God who is so objective as to be like a thing for science to study like any other thing, that God is also not real. And the God who would be like a Santa Clause, whom we can entreat to manipulate the physical world in the ways we would like, to change this thing or this person, or who will make sure the right lottery ticket is chosen, in that God we ought also not believe. But in the God of the Bible, yes, let us believe. In the God of Jesus Christ, yes, let us believe. In the God who loves us and sets before us the ways of life and death so as to guide us and support us, who wants us to pray for help to improve ourselves in order to develop in ourselves the right thoughts, attitudes beliefs, and behaviors, the God whose ways and thoughts are so high above ours that we would never insist that God do to the world around us what we want, yes, in that God let us believe. In the subjective God, the God of the heart, the God who is the sound of sheer silence, of that God partake, in that God believe. And by God's help may those who doubt the reality of that God see the proof of what we believe in our lives.

Second, atheism is a faith just as is theism. If someone does not believe in spiritual reality then that is a leap of faith not a scientific fact. A negative can not be proven. It is questionable to say for certain that something does *not* exist. If someone has had no personal experience of God, and can find no evidence of God, it can not logically be concluded from there that God does not exist. All that can be said is that so far that person has not experienced God and so far that person has found no evidence of God. The most that can logically be said at that point is that one can not know whether God exists or not. Agnosticism can claim to be logically defensible. Atheism can not. Atheism is a leap of faith just like theism. The Christian says, I believe in God because I have experienced what I count to be God's presence and I see what is for me evidence of God's glory. The atheist says, I do not believe in God because I have had no experience which I would call an experience of God and I see no evidence of the existence of God in the world around me. Both are honest assessments. Both are statements of faith.

Third, God is not subject to scientific investigation. God is not a product of $E=mc^2$. Remember that time in the Bible when God is first introducing the divine self to Moses. And Moses asks God what God would like to be called. Sort of like, what's your name? Mike, Joe? Sue? And God gives what might be called the Popeye answer, *I am who I am*, which in Hebrew was literally Yahweh and from which the word Jehovah comes. In other words, God can not be ascribed a name as other beings. The Muslim Sufi's of the middle ages developed the biblical idea of God's complete otherness from anything else that we know. God is spiritual. God is as no other thing, as no thing, as nothing. God is nothing? Well, at least like no other thing that we know. Christianity says, Judaism says, Islam says, that there is a whole other world which is real but not a part of this physical universe or subject to its laws. Spiritual reality is not a product of Einstein's formula for matter and energy. And yet this reality can be known in our most elementary awareness, in the deep heart, in what religion calls the soul. And when we open ourselves to it, we discover it to be the greatest thrill of all!

Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God*, New York: Random House, 1993.

“Investigating Atheism.” *University of Cambridge*. Web. 2008.

“Persecution in the Early Church.” *Religionfacts*. Web. 2004-10.