

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Is atheism on the attack?

3:02 PM PST, January 19, 2011

Q. With the recent publication of books such as "god [sic] Is Not Great," "The God Delusion," "Letter To A Christian Nation" and "The End Of Faith" by so-called "New Atheists" like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, atheism seems to have gone on the attack. Labeled "angry atheists" by believers, these authors and those who agree with them have been accused of not being able to get past their hate when dealing with religion. Believers also charge that many atheists regularly depict religious people as being evil, malicious and hypocritical, and that they use religion to either further their own agendas or enslave followers, among other charges.

Some atheists, on the other hand, believe that they're right to be angry and cite such things as the teaching of creationism in schools, the encroachment of religion into political life, the scandals involving high-profile Christian leaders and politicians, Islamic terrorism and the Catholic child-abuse scandal as valid reasons not only not to believe in God or Allah, but to be vehemently anti-religion as a whole.

Do you believe that atheism has become more "venomous," as one writer puts it? Are you worried that writers like Harris, Hitchens and Dawkins may "deconvert" religious people, or do you think the religious faith — whether on an individual or societal level — can survive such attacks? Do you know any atheists, and if so, could they really be described as "angry?" Do some of their points make sense?

The interesting thing to me about whether the authors of a number of recent books extolling the virtues of atheism are angry, venomous, and potentially dangerous is that the same question has not been posed about authors writing from the perspectives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam over thousands of years of our history. Theists throughout these years launched crusades, burned infidels at the stake, hunted down witches, and waged wars against their religious enemies – in addition to writing inflammatory things about them. Why then should theists today be concerned when some contemporary authors simply write about their religious beliefs in negative terms?

For better or worse, the existence of God is not something that can be proven, however much we may wish that were true. That is why belief in a God is called faith, not proof. As an illustration of that point, I will share a story told by UU minister Rev. Forrest Church about a time when one of his congregants confessed that she did not believe in God. His answer to her was to ask her to describe to him the God she did not believe in, saying that the God she did not believe in probably was a God he did not believe in, either.

I am a Unitarian Universalist theist, although that is not true of all of us. But I am not concerned that others in our religious tradition do not share my views. Nor do I expect that my understanding of God is the same as that of those in many other traditions. The God of my understanding is not an anthropomorphic being, either male or female, but is instead a divine force that resides in each of us and connects us for good with all those in our world and beyond.

My hope is that we can stop arguing about beliefs and discover the many ways that we can live out our beliefs for the benefit of all. Maybe then we will find, whether we believe in God or not, that we are drawn together rather than apart.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills

La Crescenta

Well, I guess if they're angry, then they're angry. It seems an exercise of limited value, when people disagree with you vehemently, to tell them that they're doing it wrong.

I am not worried that they will de-convert the faithful, or even the fence-sitters, in any large numbers. People are drifting quietly away from religion all on their own, without needing an angry leader to follow. Most people I know are not looking for more Big Controversies in their lives, and are exhausted by the mere thought of all that emotional drama.

But it is interesting to wonder where the anger is coming from — the usual laundry list of the Church's history of errors doesn't seem to explain the degree of emotion. Maybe it's just part of the general vitriol of public discourse in America. The tea party's angry, bloggers and commentators are angry, reality TV is angry; why can't the atheists be angry too?

But what a waste of anger, to simply shake your fist at the whole institution and condemn its very reason for being (believing in something that can't be seen), instead of calling for specific reforms. It's the interpersonal equivalent of screaming, "You suck!" instead of making a reasonable and reasoned request for someone to change a behavior or two.

There's plenty that can and should be changed in the Church. It's in an era of paradigmatic transition, reexamining itself at all levels of theology, practice and mission. Such a creative conversation is possible right now, between those inside and those outside the church.

But "You suck!" and "You suck too!" isn't the conversation we need to have.

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada Flintridge

Most of the atheists I know do not seem to be angry. In fact, the atheists I have met seem to be thoughtful people.

Can society survive the attacks of the so-called "angry" atheists? Of course! Also, many atheists have given more thought to their faith (atheism is a faith, by the way) than a lot of believers I know.

Atheists, I believe, actually provide a service for believers, because with their questions and doubts, they can actually help believers to think about their faith and then hammer out what they believe and don't believe. The ancient Greeks had a saying: "the unexamined life is not worth living." I would say the same is true of a person's faith: the unexamined faith is not worth having.

A couple of centuries ago Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, came up with the phrase, "God is dead."

A couple of decades ago I saw something funny that believers should appreciate (my apologies, atheists): "God is dead' — Nietzsche."

That was followed by: "'Nietzsche is dead' — God."

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

La Cañada Flintridge

King Solomon wisely wrote that "There is nothing new under the sun." "New Atheism" is nothing more than the same ages-old rejection of God. In fact, the obvious antagonistic mindset behind these book titles perfectly fits the Bible's description of what happens to the character of a person who has hardened his heart and has willfully rejected God.

Not to be crass, but atheists who want to keep God completely out of public life have lost touch with reality. Faith in God is part of the fabric of who believers are and how we interact in society. And why should atheists be allowed to force their (anti) religious views on everybody else, anyway? We weren't founded as "One Nation Under Secularism."

The one charge of atheists against the faithful that makes sense is when they point out ways we have sinned. Believers do sin, sometimes grievously and in the public eye. But then scripture says that "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8). Christianity has never been a claim to sinless perfection — it is the claim that the sinless son of God died to pay the wages of our sins, past, present and future. Authentic Christians confess our sins, repent and get on with life serving Jesus.

People may have misused the Christian faith to control others, but then wicked people have also misused politics, economics and weapons to do the same. Jesus Christ enslaved nobody. In fact, he let those who rejected him walk away, and he left those who asked him to leave. He does the same thing to this day. To say that an atheist is able to de-convert a person is to say that he is able to take a believer away from Jesus Christ. But Jesus himself said, "I give eternal life to [my sheep], and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

Faith is a gift from God. It cannot be merited, nor can it be earned. It is free. To whom God gives the gift of faith is according to his will, and that will is incomprehensible to us humans. But it is designed for the good of every person, for God loves all of his creatures.

That I have the faith and another does not makes no sense to me, but it makes divine sense to God. He gave me the gift of faith at baptism, and I continue to ask him to increase my faith — for it is what binds me to God and to my brothers and sisters who make up his body on this earth.

Those who do not have the faith are by no means punished for this, nor are they less loved and gifted by God. I know they prefer not to talk about God, but I can only talk about life and the characteristics of life in reference to God: He is, according to my faith, the great designer and creator of all things.

Do I believe that God loves the atheist? Absolutely.

Do I believe that he gifts the atheist freely and liberally? Of course, because God gifts all of us freely and liberally.

We can only live according to our conscience. If our conscience tells us, as it does, what is right and wrong in our lives, then we have to follow that direction. We cannot go against our conscience. I can no more say "There is no God!" than my atheist brother or sister can say "I believe in God!" I accept their lack of belief in God and only hope that they can and will accept my faith. Such acceptance is the only foundation for our love for one another demanded by the God that I believe in.

Fr. Dick Albarano

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church

Burbank

This is an interesting question for any person who practices spirituality, whether their path is Christianity (in the case of Unity, we are known as a church of practical Christianity), Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Sufism, Sikhism or even that of a 12-step recovery program. All of these spiritual paths believe in a higher power.

Contemporary atheists and their philosophy cannot truly threaten a person of faith. We all have a slightly different definition of the One Power and the One Presence (God or creator); thankfully, we live in a nation where we have religious (or non-religious) freedom.

Our spiritual path, or faith, is a matter of choice. We all seek to live together in respect and tolerance for each other's religious choices.

The Rev. Jeri Linn

Unity Church of the Valley

La Crescenta

I do not run into many full-blown atheists. It takes real hubris to think you've searched every corner of the universe and concluded unequivocally that no God can be found. So they are rare, and perhaps anger is the fuel that perpetuates their position in God-traditional countries. According to the Bible, "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 53:1 TNIV). I believe the Bible, and I believe its author.

Agnostics are everywhere, and I was once one of these. Agnostics hedge their bet, thinking that though they have no commitment to God, there is always the possibility that something previously unconsidered will arise and garner their concession. Practically speaking, agnostics are atheists, and they get comfortable in their noncommittal to a moral lawgiver, living instead according to their own moral whims under society's legal system. I have felt the same atheistic disdain from agnostics when conversing about Jesus Christ, however, because his way is narrow, and comfort dictates that an acceptable god wouldn't make demands on anyone, let alone a specific and absolute one.

In my religion there is no de-conversion. Apostates are essentially such from before ever trying Christianity on for size. They give it a shot, or they were born into a family of Christians so they assume they were automatically grandfathered in, only to reject their affiliation later in life. That's all it was, an affiliation, and like lodge membership or committee participation, they leave without much internal struggle. These are the ones that perhaps the New Atheists might most affect and so "de-convert." But genuinely born-again people step across a divide from death to life. There is no stepping back, anymore than one can step back from a parachute jump once they have left the plane. The difference is that the Christian floats gently into the hands of the creator and the angry atheists and indifferent agnostics keeps falling indefinitely.

Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

Montrose

Based on the numerous people I am close to who don't believe in God, the notion of angry atheists on the attack seems far-fetched. But the rise of religious fundamentalism worldwide and its successful forays into politics and government is real enough and a reaction certainly is well-earned.

It is hard, though, to imagine an atheist or secular humanist coming close to the venom routinely produced by some right-wingers who claim to be Christians. But just as Rush Limbaugh does not typify Christians or even conservatives, so are there differences among those of us who desire freedom from religion.

Ricky Gervais is my choice as an atheist spokesperson, so I don't know in what context words like "evil" and "malicious" may have been used by Dawkins, Hitchens, et al. However, there certainly have been actions in the name of religion that are evil and malicious, and calling a spade a spade is not the same as using these words to describe religion itself.

As for hypocrisy, I believe that the Abrahamic faiths have quite a bit to answer for. Their patriarch is a man who was willing to sacrifice his son in obedience to a voice he heard in his head. With some notable personal and institutional exceptions throughout history, they have acquiesced to, if not actively blessed, injustice. Working for peace is a central tenet of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, yet their response to war in recent years has ranged from "God is on our side" to passive complicity, again with notable but rare exceptions.

Just as a war for atheism is unimaginable, widespread de-conversion is also not likely, at least not due to atheist prosthelytizing — another oxymoron.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

To audaciously proclaim that there is no God seems both arrogant and juvenile to me. This is because only someone capable of being in all places at the same time – with a perfect knowledge of all that is in the universe – can make such a statement based on the facts. In other words, a person would have to be God to say there is no God. Instead, I affirm (with a universe of evidence on my side) that God is. He is real. I believe King David was right when he wrote:

"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'"(Psalm 53:1).

Christians say, "We know God exists."

Christians say, "We know how the universe came to be."

Christians say, "We know personally the one through whom the universe received its life."

Christians say, "We know the author of life."

We theists are used to having atheists question our reasoning. But we have questions of our own for those who question the existence of God. Here's one: "If there is no God, what is the origin of the universe? How did the universe come to be?" Atheists have no unified answer. Instead they offer three possibilities, none of which is compelling:

1. "The universe is an illusion." This makes self the only reality and it renders all science meaningless. Every human relationship calls illusionism a lie. By the way, I notice that people who maintain that the universe is an illusion still look both ways before crossing the street.
2. "The universe is eternal." The astronomer Carl Sagan said, "The cosmos is all there is, all there was and all there ever will be." This suggests that the universe itself accounts for its own existence. Matter always existed. Matter is eternal. This is not science; it's religion. This requires faith in matter instead of faith in God. The new "angry" atheists are not open-minded or reasonable at all. Instead, they are people of faith and apologists for their new religion – a secular fundamentalism. Hence they become angry with anyone who deviates from their new orthodoxy.

Edwin Hubble's discovery that the universe is uniformly expanding in all directions led George Gamow to the Big Bang theory, which demonstrates that the universe had a definite beginning a finite time ago. Moreover, an eternal universe flies in the face of the second law of thermodynamics, which says that everything in the universe is running inexorably downhill from order to disorder, from complexity to chaos. If the universe were eternally old, it would have died a heat-loss death an eternity ago. This is nonsense and requires extraordinary faith.

3. "The universe came from nothing." Reason, which atheists say they follow, tells us that out of nothing comes nothing. (Good grief! Even Maria Von Trapp knew this: "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could.") Beyond that, this position violates the first law of thermodynamics: Energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only change forms. To say an effect can exist without a cause, one must deny the basis for all scientific

investigation and rational thought. No one would seriously believe that a house or a car or a planet or a star simply popped into being without a cause. But this is what some choose to believe, instead of believing in God.

Rather than having their own beliefs and keeping them to themselves, the angry atheists have become evangelists, spreading a new dogma and attacking people of traditional faith. They have not dethroned God. They've simply become religious.

Rev. Jon Karn

Light on the Corner Church

Montrose

As always, we need to be careful in making generalizations about specific groups based on the writings and commentary of a few. The atheists that I know do not display contempt or anger. Rather, they are thoughtful individuals who have come to a reasoned conclusion that God does not exist. Although I do not agree with them, I respect their decision, do not ridicule them and understand their skepticism.

In contrast, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennet, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, the "New Atheists," approach their atheism from a different perspective. They share a belief that religion should not simply be tolerated, but it should be countered, criticized and exposed. In their writings, their intolerance, self-righteousness and intellectual elitism is manifest. To me, they represent the secular version of the extreme religious right. Now, those are harsh words, so let me put my comments in perspective.

Several years ago, I read Christopher Hitchens book titled: "god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything." I will readily admit that I agree with a number of his observations on religion. On the other hand, I see in his writings intolerance, intellectual elitism and a lack of scholarship, which severely undercuts his arguments and their creditability.

For example, Hitchens discusses in his book the founding of Mormonism. Rather than take a scholarly approach to this subject, he uses biased and inflammatory language and makes sweeping generalization and conclusions based on questionable sources (which I have read). He shows that he knows little about the subject himself, but is very willing to make the reader believe that he does. He uses a similar approach for other religions. His motives are clear.

Rather than dwell on the negative further, let me end with this positive thought from the Apostle Paul: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept.... For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." 1 Cor. 15:19, 20 & 22.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

La Cañada II ward

La Cañada Flintridge

All of the atheists I know are kind, thoughtful and decent people who have no problem with my beliefs and harbor no anger against religious people. They properly adhere to the important concept of "live and let live."

Regarding the so-called angry atheists, I don't think it's important for me or any other clergy member to analyze whether they're becoming more spiteful or examine whether they are increasing their attacks on believers.

Frankly, I don't believe it is a wise use of our limited time to expend too much energy trying to figure out exactly what it is about our way of life that perturbs this group, since they probably will remain unhappy regardless of what is done.

I do think, however, that it is important for religious organizations and houses of worship to seriously consider the various allegations lodged against their respective religions — whether they are made by atheists or anyone else — and to assess whether there is any merit to them. If they are baseless claims, then they can be ignored. But if there is truth to the contentions, then they should be addressed.

The unfortunate and painful reality is that many reports have surfaced in the media over the past few years regarding misconduct by clergy members and religious institutions. These stories are chilling and the victims are often helpless individuals or children — which makes the incidents even more heartbreaking. This type of activity is morally repugnant and totally unacceptable.

Religion should be kept pure and unadulterated. Of course there will always be some people who try to exploit the spiritual sensitivities of others in order to promote their own selfish or decadent agendas — but this should be a rare exception. Financial scandal, sexual misconduct, child abuse and acts of violence are despicable in any context and should have no place in religious circles. If and when immoral and destructive actions such as these are discovered, they must be immediately eradicated and those responsible should be properly disciplined.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

Glendale