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“Faith of a Non-Believer (Atheism)”

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We cannot discuss atheism without bringing God into the conversation.

Disbelief in God means one of two things: either you believed and lost your faith, or never had it at all. For me it was the latter. I believed until the Holocaust made God impossible.

Eli Wiesel also influenced my journey to non-belief when I read his remembrance, “Night”, recounting his Auschwitz camp experiences. As a young teenager, on one fateful night in April 1944, he and all the Jews of his Transylvanian village were shipped in cattle cars to Auschwitz. By some happenstance of fate he survived and became the conscience of a generation.

The most haunting horror he describes is the execution of three prisoners that all the inmates were forced to witness. Scott Alexander describes it this way: “it seems that the SS had captured 2 men and a young boy and sentenced them to death by hanging for allegedly collaborating with the Underground. To make an example of them, the Nazis had the prisoners assembled before the gallows in the prison yard. As the three victims were stood up on chairs and had their necks placed in the nooses, the two men cried, ‘long live liberty’...but all eyes were on the child who remained silent.

Wiesel remembered him as a young boy with “a refined and beautiful face ... he was lividly pale almost calm, biting his lip ... he had the face of a sad angel.” As the sign was given by the officer in charge to kick the chairs out from underneath the three condemned prisoners, Wiesel heard a man behind him mournfully ask, **“Where is God? Where is he?”**

There was “total silence” throughout the camp... on the horizon, the sun was setting. “ All the assembled prisoners were forced to march past the gallows.

Wiesel writes about what he saw: “The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving, being so light, the child was still alive. For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face.

"He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed. Behind me I heard the same man asking, 'Where is God now?' and I heard a voice within me answer him.

**"Where is he? Here he is--he is hanging here on this gallows."**

Wiesel's friend Francois Mauriac, who knew the details of the author's deeply religious childhood, later wrote this about what the execution meant to him. "From the time when [Wiesel's] conscience first awoke he had lived only for God and had been reared on the Talmud...dedicated to God and the eternal. But, [in the death camps] Nietzsche's cry [became] an almost physical reality...God is dead, the God of love, of gentleness, of comfort, the Old testament God of Abraham has vanished forevermore beneath the gaze of this tortured child..."

As Wiesel writes,

**"Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust."**

Later, in the mid-sixties *Time* magazine declared "God is dead."

The rancid smoke that rose from the ovens at Auschwitz rose to a dark and empty sky, already declaring the all-knowing, all-seeing God of the Judeo-Christian Bible dead or gone.

Humanity was on its own.

In the face of the world's many evils there is little to do but weep. For most UUs, we are also on our own. We exist on a continuum between mysticism and humanism, theism and atheism, belief and doubt, devotion and skepticism. These tendencies live in many of us.

"The humanist and theist live in me", sometimes in conflict, a dynamic tension in dialogue. The certainty of any faith or not-faith is hard to swallow. Pure atheism seems to be fraying at the edges.

Fundamentalism does not depend on a god, "if by fundamentalism we mean absolute certainty."

Perhaps none of us can be that certain. I believe however, there is common ground between atheists and most UUs, when it comes to rejecting the irrationality of dogma and creeds, and about the role of religion in public life.

What gets in my way is Absolute certainty. Each person has his or her own reasons for becoming a UU.

I could no longer accept the God of Judaism and wanted to find my own answers to the great questions of life and death. I am willing to embrace uncertainty of belief or disbelief.

Dan Kennedy writes, "Atheism serves to counter a culture suffused with piety and unthinking invocations of God, invocations voiced to explain everything from why some people live and some die to who wins the World Series."

In a world plagued by -isms that claim to have "The Answer", Atheism serves as a counterweight. In considering the topics of Atheism, Agnosticism, Humanism, and the nature of God, Cynthia Landrum writes that, "it seems good to start with some general definitions.

"It is important to recognize that Atheists don't believe in any god, not just the Judeo-Christian God. There are many distinctions you can make among atheists from strong to weak. A strong Atheist believes it is certain that there is no God. A weak Atheist does not Believe in God but doesn't assert the lack of God. Non-theist: Someone who does not assert a belief in God including Agnostics, Atheists, most Buddhists, and many others in this group.

"For discussion purposes, let's reserve the term *Atheist* for the group that is really strong Atheists, and use *Non-theists* as the catch-all term.

"Agnostic: Someone who does not know whether or not God exists. A weak Agnostic does not know if there is a God, but may feel they are still weighing evidence that will offer new revelation. A strong Agnostic believes it's ultimately unknowable whether or not God exists.

"Humanism: 'is a philosophy without God based on reason and compassion.' Secular Humanists often assert that Humanism is a philosophy and has nothing to do with religion. Religious Humanists see Humanism as a religion; albeit one that does not require a belief in God."

I am a wavering Agnostic, convinced I cannot know if God exists. I am a Humanist, because I believe we humans can rely on our own experience to answer the great ethical and morality questions of existence.

I wonder how you define yourself?

As an Agnostic, I have very clear ideas, based on deep emotions, of what kind of God is possible, and what kind is not. Landrum writes, and I concur, "I cannot believe in a God who:

- Chooses the victor in football games.
- Chooses sides in human wars.
- Saves some people from disease while letting others die.
- God does not "bless America" or any God does not create diseases or natural disasters to punish people. God does not appear to some people and not others.
- God does not damn people for their sexual orientation or gender or race.
- God does not damn anyone.
- God does not demand belief in God.
- God does not condemn those who do not believe in God.

"I am atheistic towards that god who would cause such things."

My heart and soul reject the idea that there could be a hateful vengeful, capricious God as in the early Old Testament. I do want to believe, and if there is a God, that God is good.

Now here is my contradiction. I deeply want to believe in God but cannot for all I have said before; but the agnostic part of me finds it impossible to completely rule out the possibility of God.

Yes, the world can be explained without God, but that doesn't negate the possibility that there is something more.

The God of humanity I could believe in, cares for and loves all people equally. I can accept the concept of a God that is love, or living energy, or the greater sum of all the parts of the universe, or something we create together in the work of love and justice. It's quite possible that humans do create God, and that God is ever-evolving, offering new revelation as it does. That God is, in effect, of our own creation and understanding.

It is an atheist understanding of the universe, independent of a creator, prime mover who interferes in the lives of people like some celestial puppeteer.

It is a disbelief compatible with Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists who are all essentially atheistic. That being said, it would seem that the atheistic position is far more common and widespread than Theists care to believe.

I am fine with that, for I have faith in humanity. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton

wrote, "when Eve took her destiny in her own hand and set minds spinning down through all the spheres of time, she declared humanity omnipotent, and today thinking people are rapt in wonder and admiration at the inventions and discoveries of science, the grandeur of man's conceptions, and the magnitude of his works."

As an advocate for "what we call God is the religion of humanity," Stanton believed in an infinite ideal of humanity: "This new religion will teach the dignity of human nature and its infinite possibilities for development...will inspire its worshippers with self respect, with noble aspirations to attain diviner heights from day to day than they yet have reached...Its creed will be Justice, Liberty, Equality for all the children of the earth."

Although she did not use the term *religious humanism*, her "religion of humanity" seems to be just that; its essence was an affirmation of human dignity, freedom from fear and superstition, and freedom of belief.

It would be fair to say she moved from humanism to Atheism with great comfort. Perhaps we do also, but with a little less certainty.

That is true for me.

How about you?

Blessed it be!