

There Are Atheists in Foxholes

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“My atheism ... is true piety towards the universe and denies only gods fashioned by men in their own image, to be servants of their human interests.”

— George Santayana

Opening Words

Marc Renault

Today we consider the saying that “there are no atheists in foxholes.” As I researched and sought to discern the truth of this claim I started to realize that, well, there is no truth to the saying. There are atheists in foxholes. Surely, there are those who instinctively reach out to God at a time of life peril, but just as certainly, there are those who fall from belief after suffering the atrocities of war.

Harvard psychologists have found that “residents of American states that suffer the most disease and harm... are also the states with the strongest belief in God.... After Hurricane Katrina, those confronted with the plight of victims didn’t use it as evidence to refute God’s existence, but instead



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used it as proof. Rather than strongly suggesting that God does not exist, suffering, it seems, actually supports belief in a supernatural deity.”²

On the other hand, writer Paul Watkins tells of his great-grandfather who fought in World War I. In the war he had been gassed and shot and had seen his platoon numerically wiped out and replaced more than three times since he first took command of it. ... [In] one of his advances across no-man’s-land... he set out with a full company and by the time he arrived at the German wire [he] was one of only two men left alive... His family had been Calvinistic Methodists, but when he returned from the war, ... he gathered the family together and banned religion in his house. ‘Either god is a bastard,’ he said, ‘or god isn’t there at all.’³

When we find ourselves in a time of great peril / grief / stress, how will that experience sharpen our concept of faith? I suppose that if someone has never reflected on faith, then a traumatic experience might move them to suddenly accept or reject belief. On the other hand, if someone has reflected deeply and constructed a coherent life-view, then the hard times may be easier to handle, and no great transformation needs to take place.

Here is the call to us, then: let us find meaning in our existence during the quiet times, so that we are not forced to make rash “belief decisions” when we find ourselves in the foxhole.

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http://www.ibcsr.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=148:belief-in-god-linked-to-suffering&catid=25:research-news&Itemid=59

³<http://atheism.about.com/od/atheismmyths/a/AtheistsFoxhole.htm>

Sermon⁴

Duane Fickeisen

You've heard it before, I'm sure, the aphorism that "there are no atheists in foxholes." It might seem to make sense that when we are keenly aware of danger, when our lives are under siege, we turn somewhere for help.

But if we look a little closer, the saying arises from the hubris of an untested assumption. In fact, there are many atheists in foxholes, and the assertion that there are none is an example of, perhaps unintended, abuse of power and privilege to deny the existence of the "other." It is similar to saying there are no gay or lesbian people in our town, or that there is no racism around us, or that anyone who appears Latino should be stopped to have her or his ID checked.

The unexamined, exclusionary assumptions we make result from a blindness that arises from failing to look around us closely, failing to pay attention. The result is to cut off opportunities for relationship and engagement.

There are, of course, foxhole conversions. A Roman Catholic priest, who served as an Army chaplain for ten years, including duty in Korea and Iraq, writes,

"Surely, some people in combat find a real and lasting belief in God, and there are many stories to prove it. What I want to flat out deny is the validity of the position that 'foxholes' naturally and invariably bring people to faith. I say 'no,' and this refutes the idea the atheism does not have the strength to stand up under the pressure of combat and possible death. It is insulting and demeaning to a person who claims to be an atheist to suggest that his/her disbelief in God represents a

⁴©2010 Duane H. Fickeisen, Boiling Springs, PA

weak position that cannot withstand the rigors of harsh experiences and that all atheists 'convert' in combat.

"More important than this is the fact that many convinced theists walk away from the trauma of combat with a broken faith system and a rejection of their previous belief in God. If the reports of returning soldiers are to be taken seriously, we have to acknowledge that wartime trauma is just as likely to obliterate a person's belief in God as it is to encourage it."⁵

Studies show that the population within the armed forces is not much different, but perhaps somewhat less religious, than the general US population. Real or assumed fears of reprisal for not professing to be a Christian probably result in underestimating the number of non-believers in the armed forces as well as in the general population, but surely there are many non-believers among us.

So let's just lay the aphorism to rest and affirm that indeed, there *are* atheists in foxholes — and in other places, including right here in the pews.

Because Unitarian Universalism does not have an established creed, people sometimes misinterpret us as not believing anything, or being the church of anything goes, where you can believe anything you want. But we are not creedless at all. Each of us has our own beliefs. We are a congregation of many creeds, and we draw inspiration from the diversity of beliefs among us.

We encourage personal exploration in the context of a covenanted community in order to delve more deeply into what really matters to you. We are very interested in your be-

⁵ "No Atheists in Foxholes?" by Fr. Sean Levine.

<http://ocawonder.com/2010/01/21/no-atheists-in-foxholes/>

liefs, but primarily in the context of how they help you give meaning to the experiences of living and dying and how they serve as guides in daily living. Whether your creed, implicit or explicit, is theistic or atheistic is less important than whether it is authentically your own and has efficacy in your life.

Your creed may be dynamic and subject to change, but for the moment at least, does it reflect a system of belief and a world view that you can embrace? Does it help you shape meaning from the experiences of life? Does it offer guidance in decision making? Does it help you respond to a crisis?

An atheist, as I am using the term this morning, is someone who does not believe that God exists — I'm being careful here not to say someone who believes that God does not exist, because among atheists there is a wide range of positions on the deity.

An implicit atheist is one who has not given much attention to the question, and has not adopted a belief in God, so by default is a non-believer, someone who does not believe that God or gods exist.

An explicit atheist is someone who, after considering the existence of God, has made an assertion, either eschewing belief in gods (sometimes referred to as 'weak' atheism), or contending that gods do not exist (referred to as 'strong' atheism). The strong atheist is someone who believes that God or gods do not exist. It's a more active position than that of the non-believer.

Another way to slice the pie is between "practical atheism" and "theoretical atheism." A practical or pragmatic atheist is someone who lives as if there were no gods, and does not rely on divine explanations of natural phenomena. He or she does not deny the existence of God, but rather finds the concept unnecessary or of no use. For the pragmatic atheist, the divine

is not a source of purpose nor does it influence their lives. A theoretical atheist, on the other hand, explicitly argues against the existence of gods.

I would put the Freedom from Religion Foundation along with Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens, who have all written popular books in opposition to theism, in the category of strong, theoretical atheism. Their vehemence and expressed disdain for religion as a harmful concept are to my mind a damaging fundamentalism not all that different from the fundamentalisms within Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. They are all damaging in the sense of putting forth an absolute one right answer and rejecting the diversity of belief among us. This cuts off the possibility of rich relationship and interchange that could enrich the lives of people on both sides of the argument.

To understand how atheistic and religious fundamentalisms are linked, we must step back and consider epistemology — the theory of knowledge and how we gain it, how we think about it, and how we communicate it.

As Karen Armstrong writes in her new book, *The Case for God*:⁶

“In most premodern cultures, there were two recognized ways of ... acquiring knowledge. The Greeks called them *mythos* and *logos*. Both were essential and neither was considered superior to the other; they were not in conflict, but complementary. Each had its own sphere of competence, and it was considered unwise to mix the two. *Logos* (‘reason’) was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world. It had, therefore, to correspond accurately

⁶ Karen Armstrong. *The Case for God*. (New York: Knopf, 2009) pp. xi-xii.

to external reality. ... *Logos* was forward-looking, continually on the lookout for new ways of controlling the environment, improving old insights, or inventing something fresh. *Logos* was essential to survival of our species. But it had its limitations: it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles. For that people turned to *mythos* or 'myth.'

"...[M]yth was not self-indulgent fantasy; rather, like *logos*, it helped people live effectively in our confusing world. ... Myths ...were really focused on the more elusive, puzzling, and tragic aspects of the human predicament that lay outside the remit of *logos*. ... A myth was never intended as an accurate account of a historical event; it was *something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time*.

"But a myth would not be effective if people simply 'believed' in it. It was essentially a program of action. It ... was up to you to take the next step and make the 'truth' of the myth a reality in your own life. The only way to assess the value and truth of any myth was to act upon it."

Or consider that there are two separate, non-overlapping magisteria as biologist Stephen Jay Gould describes:

"The magisterium of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory)? The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry."⁷

⁷ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (London, 2001). Cited by Karen Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

Both religious fundamentalists and strong theoretical atheists attempt to describe belief from the standpoint of *logos* or the magisterium of science. I mean that both expect literal, testable truth. But for questions of the meaning of life, comfort in a crisis, hope in the face of despair, and guidance for ethical behavior, we're better turning to *mythos* and the magisterium of religion.

It may be an interesting debate to consider evidence for or against the existence of gods from the standpoint of *logos*, but it doesn't really answer the questions that are in the realm of *mythos*.

That's not at all to say that a systematic understanding of the meaning of life, of purpose, ethics, comfort, and hope must posit the existence of a deity. Indeed, the point today is that a fully satisfying *mythos* can be created from an atheistic point of view, whether the world view starts with a pragmatic or a theoretical approach to atheism.

A belief system grounded in atheism or agnosticism is not inherently better than one grounded in theism. The test is not whether either is absolutely true in a factual sense, but whether the system has value when you act on it. Does it serve you? Does it help you live out your life story? Does it help define a set of espoused values and make them operational in your daily life? And perhaps especially for Unitarian Universalists, is it reasonable?

So let's make a closer examination of what an atheistic world view might offer as guiding principles.

It may be helpful in a crisis to understand that bad things happen either as a result of natural processes or through human action. In the former category are the natural disasters including earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes, lightning strikes, floods, and droughts. In the latter are domestic vio-

lence, warfare, unjust distribution of resources, and discriminatory practices. Yes, there is some overlap — human-caused climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of storms and changing precipitation patterns. Land use planning that encourages building in flood plains exposes more of us to harm from big deluges. Poor enforcement of building codes may result in greater damage from hurricanes and earthquakes.

For many of us an explanation in natural laws, random events, and human agency is more comforting than the thought that a deity controls such events and chooses to protect some of us while inflicting disaster on others. Why, we might well demand to know, do disasters often seem to strike hardest at poor minorities?

A sudden and unexpected death or other disaster often leaves us asking why, but not finding any adequate answer. It is better, I counsel, to consider not “why?” but “what now?” and to respond out of love and compassion, to rely on relationships and community as sources of strength. None of these requires God’s presence.

Another question that is often raised is “Why be good in the absence of possible eternal punishment and without the guidance of divine law?” There are people who do not know the difference between right and wrong and others who commit evil acts without concern for the consequences. Sociopaths are not likely to be persuaded by threats of punishment or rules no matter the source. But most of us know what’s right and what’s not. We balance the costs and benefits of potential actions from the standpoint of both personal and communal viewpoints, and usually include an accounting for potential risks. The *mythos* we carry with us offers allurements and warnings in its story of consequences. There are evolutionary

arguments in favor of the development of altruism and certainly many stories of altruistic behavior on the part of non-human animals.

UU theologian and metaphysician Charles Hartshorne was an avid amateur ornithologist. He became interested in the question of why birds sing, and his research showed that they sing for enjoyment. If birds sing for pleasure and enjoyment, why wouldn't human beings act to bring about more enjoyment, and wouldn't that mean doing what's right more often than doing what's wrong?

Doing what's right simply works better more often than doing what's wrong. Perhaps we choose to be good because we've learned that it works to make our lives more fulfilling.

And what about meaning? How does a non-theist find meaning in the experiences of life? Meaning may come from recognition of the interdependence of the web of existence, from the wonderful and awesome mystery of the development of life itself. While we're discovering that there are a stunning number of potential universes that *might* have planets somewhat like Earth capable of sustaining conscious life, it still is a miracle — even if it is one that can be explained by natural laws — that we are here together this morning, considering these questions, living and breathing and experiencing our relationships with each other. Finding meaning in that does not require a divine creator or observer.

We are a part of a vast, interconnected, whole system. Our presence impacts every other entity in the system. The choices we make matter. Paradoxically, at the same time each of us is a tiny fraction of the whole. Our actions may well be swamped by those of other entities.

Imagine standing barefoot in the surf on a sandy beach. As the ocean water washes over your feet, the grains of sand

move and rearrange. Your presence has forever altered the arrangement of the grains of sand, and thus of the beach itself. And yet moments after you step out the surf obliterates the traces of your presence. Both are true — your presence has forever changed the beach and it has made almost no difference whatsoever.

So what's left for us to do? How about to enjoy our lives and our relationships? To be agents of transformation and care? To nourish, cherish, and bless our world? For in that we leave a legacy of care. Even if the difference we make is on the atomic scale, its impacts are universal.

May it be so. Amen.

Image: American infantrymen in ponchos, huddled in a foxhole. Okinawa, 1945. Photographer unknown, public domain.