

Going Beyond God, and Discovering a Religion: An Atheistic Approach to Being Religious

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An atheistic orientation to religion has no need of *God* concepts or the associated language. In the estimation of some, the notion of being religious, as well as atheistic, is inconceivable, and even objectionable. Judith Hayes, atheist, columnist, and author, makes just such an objection in *The Happy Heretic*: “Religion is almost universally understood to recognize some sort of supernatural realm and/or being.”¹ Hayes adds, “Without that essential object of veneration, a deity of some kind, there can be no religion.”² However, I contend Hayes’s objection has been culturally influenced by traditional Judeo-Christian theological formulations. Hayes has a limited view of religion, and the meaning of being religious, as do many individuals.

It is time for alternatives to traditional concepts of religion as being merely theistic, and Walter Kaufmann offers historical examples in his seminal work *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, wherein, through a more inclusive study, he clarifies the nature of religion and draws an important conclusion concerning the range of religious expression:

We have seen that there are a great many religious beliefs, which contain no overt reference to God, including historical affirmations, generalizations, and speculative propositions; and we may now add that there are whole religions without any god.³

Kaufmann clearly indicates the issue of religion is not reducible to the presence of *God-language* or the lack thereof. I assert that from this approach it is possible to articulate the beginnings of a religious atheism, one that utilizes radically different patterns of expression from those found in traditional religions of Western culture.

In further examination of Kaufmann’s presentation, one discovers three types of religious orientation outlined. The first type, *polytheism*, embraces a belief in many *gods*, a form that existed in ancient Egypt, Greece, and India. In the second type, *monotheism*, we find a form familiar to our culture, which embraces belief in one *god*, a formulation exhibited in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The third and last type presented by Kaufmann is the *atheistic*, which possesses no belief in *god* concepts, and which is found in the historic religious traditions of Theravada Buddhism, Jainism, the Upanishads, Confucianism, and Taoism. Kaufmann concludes from this historical overview, “It is false that belief that the world was created by God, or belief in God’s omniscience and omnipotence, is inscribed in the heart of every man...”⁴ I agree with this premise and hold that it is possible for us to reframe our understanding of religious practices and beliefs, one that embraces the possibility of the atheist being religious, a

¹ Judith Hayes, *The Happy Heretic* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000), 97.

² *Ibid.*, 98.

³ Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

sentiment Kaufmann expressed, “The issue between theism and godlessness is not reducible to that between religion and lack of religion.”⁵

However, I have a point of difference with Kaufmann. He refers to the importance of religious belief, which in my understanding is not indicative of being religious. Being religious is not just a matter of belief. It is a qualitative experience of life, a view reminiscent of John Dewey expressed in *A Common Faith*:

The religious attitude signifies something that is bound through imagination to a *general* attitude. This comprehensive attitude, moreover, is much broader than anything indicated by “moral” in its usual sense. The quality of attitude is displayed in art, science and good citizenship.⁶

I characterize the nature of being religious as that which enables one to transcend the speculative concerns associated with metaphysics and engage a purposeful and intentional responsiveness to the world. Here, Dewey encourages us to reclaim important religious qualities and values from “identification with creeds and cults of religions.”⁷ In addition, Dewey has sought to remind us:

Religious qualities and values if they are real at all are not bound up with any single item of intellectual assent, not even that of the existence of the God of theism....⁸

Here are insights for constructing a strong argument for a viable atheistic-religious life stance. I find these basic ideas and concepts outlined in the writings of Kaufmann and Dewey.

It is necessary to frame this atheistic-religious orientation within a thoroughly naturalistic ontological perspective, one that allows me to leave behind the realms of the supernatural and the speculations of metaphysics. I find it hopeful to see the naturalistic approaches to religion and theological studies growing in prominence.

In considering human history I find a contrasting approach can be discovered, one of various attempts at understanding nature through an anthropomorphic view, an approach that some wish to continue even today. George H. Smith, atheist and philosopher, has presented a glimpse of this human trait in *Why Atheism?*:

[When] we lack knowledge of natural causes, our imagination fills the void by attributing to nature the same kind of purposes and intentions that we observe in ourselves and other human beings. A kind of metaphysical transference is at work.⁹

I contend that our desire has been for nature to display an affinity to our humanity with qualities such as purpose, intention, and volition, and thereby become less inexplicable,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 23.

⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁹ George H. Smith, *Why Atheism?* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000), 201.

as well as less frightening. In my opinion, this approach to nature endowed our ancestors with a sense that the universe was working toward the fulfillment of human ends, and that nature was concerned with our existence, a perception lingering in the minds of some, as Smith has suggested:

We think that the world was specially created for our benefit, and its complex structure and immense beauty must have been designed by a purposeful, powerful, and intelligent being.¹⁰

I agree, clearly this evaluative process was an attempt to create a source of psychological comfort in the face of the often harsh and difficult realities of our world; however, as a religious atheist I, and I know others will as well, must refuse to participate in this process of rationalization, which Smith has effectively delineated for us:

We evaluate a natural phenomenon as “well-ordered” when it can be easily understood or it affects us favorably—whereas we speak of “confusion” (or “chance” or “chaos”) when confronted with phenomenon that eludes our understanding or brings unforeseen evils upon us.¹¹

Our existence is of no importance to the silent spans of space, but only has importance to ourselves; human existence is a human concern. I am fully aware that this fact is unsettling to some, and even frightening. Nevertheless, it is time for us to realize that the natural world continues in its processes without thought or reflection, least of all for us. James A. Haught, journalist, author, and founding member of the UU Infidels, has expressed this:

The universe is a vast, amazing, seething dynamo which has no discernible purpose except to keep on churning. From quarks to quasars, it’s alive with incredible power. But it seems utterly indifferent to any moral laws. It destroys as blindly as it nurtures.¹²

As I examine the nature of our environment, I discover sovereign forces able to create floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis, as well as roses, rainbows, pine trees, and snowflakes, and with this realization I am stirred with a sense of awe, wonder, and reverence. Humans are at the mercy of these natural forces, which cannot be appeased, or redirected by our supplications or entreaties. Our only response is to learn and adapt to the conditions under which we live, and seek a greater sense of connection to this environment.

I am reminded that some continue the vain search for intelligence behind the mysteries of life, or for signs of a designer, and I concur with Haught, who expresses effectively the atheistic perspective of these metaphysical explanations:

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 203.

¹² James A. Haught, *2000 Years of Disbelief: Famous People with the Courage to Doubt* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1996), 324.

Are the profound forces of the universe God? I don't know. Is human love God? I don't know. Is there a personal God waiting to reward me in a heaven or punish me in hell? I don't know—but I doubt it.¹³

It is doubt that can give rise to our inquiries, and in turn can cultivate a sense of mystery in relation to the complex processes of nature, but not our wishful thinking. We stand before a world not yet fully understood by us, and which may never be, but this miracle of life is enough to inspire a growing sense of awe and humility.

As we confront the limitations of human control in relation to the fierce and wondrous powers of nature, this sense of reverent respect begins to emerge as described by Paul Woodruff: "Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitation; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control...."¹⁴ Reverence born from naturalism is a concept I hold that the religious atheist can embrace, one which can give a sense of connection to life, and can be found within the processes at work in nature.

I see human beings as participants in nature, and therefore, not as *more* than natural beings. This concept can temper any potential hubris, and can enable us to cultivate a reverent response to life. Woodruff expresses, "... you are niggardly with awe if you never feel awe for a great whale, a majestic redwood, or a range of tall mountains."¹⁵ It is his contention, and I concur, that this reverent response to nature is a basic human experience, "... if you do not have the capacity to be awestruck at the sight of the majesties of nature you are missing part of the usual human endowment." I would argue as well that reverence is a universal human characteristic, one which transcends the limits of theological formulations, and is available to any attentive observer, as Woodruff has stated, "Reverence runs across religions and even outside them through the fabric of any community, however secular."¹⁶ To be reverent is to be more fully human.

In the past, we arrogantly held that humans were the pinnacle of nature, and thereby were in a position of dominion. However, we have been humbled by the truths of science, and there has emerged a new narrative, dare I say, one in which we find ourselves at the mercy of the forces of nature, forces of both life and death, just as are all living beings.

In any consideration of reverence, I find the question of spirituality naturally arises. However, to find an answer is not easy, as evidenced in a response from Marilyn Westfall, a member of the UU Infidels, during an interview I conducted with her:

I struggle with the words "spiritual" and "spirituality" a great deal, and tend not to like them, though I know that for many people the words are quite useful. For me, the word "sublime" conveys more meaning, has more substance....¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁷ Excerpt from interview conducted by Kennan J. Pomeroy with Marilyn Westfall via e-mail, 5 & 10 December 2005.

Westfall further describes, “A sublime experience...might be defined as when one’s sense of self breaks down, allowing one to experience the completely ‘other.’”¹⁸ In addition, experiences of the sublime can be discovered through human relations and in connection with nature that offer a deeper, richer, and more substantial encounter with life. I would further contend that from this it might be possible for some to extrapolate a mystical quality to life; however, it needs to be a naturalistic mysticism.

An atheistic spirituality emerges from thoughts offered by David Eller in his clearly written book, *Natural Atheism*. However, I must note as a matter of clarity that Eller finds it difficult to refer to the view he presents as spirituality due to the associations with “...[the] invisible...[the] immaterial...Gods...[and] spirits...angels and cherubs and ascended masters...,”¹⁹ and I agree with this analysis, as there is often a sense of intrusion by beings and forces from other realms, which is connoted in the use of this term. However, I would contend that Eller presents an answer to this problematic situation, one compatible with the atheistic-religious perspective: “Spiritual experiences are those that seem to have more of that animating or vital stuff or force than mundane experiences do,”²⁰ a view that echoes the notion of the sublime presented by Westfall.

As I further examine Eller’s thoughts, I discover an eloquent description of spiritual experiences, which may qualify as descriptive of the sublime:

[It] is *we*—puny material beings that we are—who have these experiences. They are merely experiences that are livelier, more forceful, more animated and animating than our run-of-the-mill experiences. It is *our* emotions that are moved, *our* awe and wonder that are peaked [*sic*], *our* life that is enhanced. It might be an external object – a mountain or a Mozart – that inspires us to this feeling, but is our feeling. What is usually described as spiritual is really *life*, really *human*.²¹

I would note here that spiritual experiences do not require the individual to experience supernatural realms or beings, but a deeper and more substantial experience of life. I am convinced, given this definition by Eller, that thoughtful atheists will be able to relate described experience, and may even be able to identify such transformative experiences in the course of their own lives, experiences which have enriched their sense of being. Here are source experiences for a spiritual approach to life.

When speaking of human relations I begin with the premise that humans are social animals, which is an anthropological view, and that from this fact the necessity for community naturally arises. I present here an understanding of community framed around the relational quality of immanence, and without resort to concepts of transcendence, a view that is consistent with an atheistic-religious perspective. This conviction is echoed by atheist and theologian Anthony B. Pinn: “Mine is a firm atheism that avoids talk of transcendence.”²² In eliminating the metaphysical and supernatural,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ David Eller, *Natural Atheism* (Crawford, N.J.: American Atheist Press, 2004), 334.

²⁰ Ibid., 338.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Anthony B. Pinn, “Community.” In *Unitarian Universalist View of God*, ed. Paul Rasor (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2001).

we can begin again a descent into life, a downward movement into human interactions and relations. For the religious atheist, community is a center for experiencing human connectedness, as Pinn has expressed:

There is nothing behind the symbol *God*. In its place, I affirm the idea of community. It is in community that we are encouraged to develop our full human potential and overcome oppression.²³

I view community as the center for inspiring individuals toward self-actualization. It is in a community of inspired living that the religious atheist can find a connectedness, and one in which affirms our humanness as a wondrous gift.

I find the relational aspect of human existence identifiable with the religious dimension as outlined here. This premise is supported by mystic, atheist, and religious scholar Sharon D. Welch "...the divine *is* that relational power, and it is neither necessary nor liberating to posit a substance or ground that exists outside of relational power."²⁴ I find the language here descriptive of a qualitative experience. It is a qualitative experience of the immanence of the religious in the absence of the metaphysical, as Welch further expresses, "...the richness of life...is possible when the alienation between humans, and between humanity and nature is overcome."²⁵ Our religious need is met through immersion in life.

My understanding of being a religious atheist holds that human relations are principal value, a value rooted within this humanistic orientation. Welch presents this evaluation: "We do not desire to become divine, but rather we work to be human...."²⁶ and she adds the descriptive, revealing the purpose of life that of becoming "spirit and dust."²⁷ Life is discovered in the midst of the complexities and challenges of human existence, which Welch has described as "[the] vibrantly imperfect."²⁸ In acts of reciprocity and relation, we find ourselves "...respond[ing] to the needs of vulnerable others, [and] at times others respond[ing] to our vulnerability...in an exchange that nourishes and sustains...."²⁹ Responsiveness gives depth and purpose to life, a purpose that can sustain us into the future, a sentiment eloquently expressed by Mark Hertzog, a Unitarian Universalist atheist:

[What] makes me a *religious* atheist is the recognition that I am connected inextricably, and not by any cosmic or mystical means, to my family, my neighbors, and the world I live in. I am conscious not merely of the miraculous

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), 173.

²⁵ Ibid., 160.

²⁶ Sharon D. Welch, "Return to Laughter." In *A Language of Reverence*, ed. Dean Grodzins (Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2004), 49.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

nature of individual life, but, on a very scientific level, I am conscious of how fragile the whole thing is.³⁰

It is this sense of human connectedness that can draw us together in community, as again Hertzog states:

My fate and your fate are to a great extent bound together. It may be enlightened self-interest—after all, the next person in trouble could be me—but I think it is more than that. As an atheist who believes there is no god who is going to take care of us, I am far more conscious of our need to take care of each other and this fragile environment in which we make our home—and far more conscious that, if I don't do something that something is not going to be done.³¹

It is this deep and abiding sense of responsibility and accountability, not in relation to concepts of *God* but in relation to human interactions, that I hold as indicative of a humanistic philosophy, and more importantly an atheistic-religious perspective. I assert that from this frame of reference a true sense of community can begin, and from this a richer more profound connection to beings such as we are.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I identify myself as an atheist, but a religious atheist. I am firmly committed to inviting persons of diverse perspectives into dialogue. However, I feel that atheists have not been fully recognized or affirmed in their spiritual journey, a concern expressed by W. Bradford Greeley, retired UU minister and self-identifying religious atheist: "Prejudices against atheism, which are rooted in our culture, obscure the religion of which an atheist is capable."³² Currently, there is a proposal from the UU Infidels which is expressive of our principled philosophy, which I would encourage the UUA to consider:

The Unitarian Universalist Association takes no position on the existence, or non-existence, of God. Members are free to reach their own conclusions about this profound question.³³

In this proposal, there is a clear indication of individual choice concerning the question of *God*, and with this an affirmation of the legitimacy of the atheistic life-stance, as well as its viability within our religious communities.

In addition, I assert that naturalism is inexorably mingled with the atheistic-religious orientation. We find ourselves in a physical world, without any metaphysical or supernatural realities, but one which is no less extraordinary, as Greeley has stated, "One does not have to affirm a belief in deity to feel awe, inspiration or mystery in life."³⁴ From this naturalistic perspective, we engage in a process of reuniting of humanity to its

³⁰ Mark Hertzog, "Life After God: An Atheist's Religion." Sermon presented at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring, Md., 24 January 1999. Accessible at <http://www.uucss.org/sermons/uu1999-01-24.html>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² W. Bradford Greeley, *The Faith of an Atheist* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, c. late 1960s).

³³ James A. Haught, "Unitarian Skeptics Feel Marginalized." *Freethought Today*, June/July 2004. Accessible at <http://www.ffrf.org/fttoday/2004/junejuly/haught.php>.

³⁴ Greeley, *The Faith of an Atheist*.

habitat. Our hope is that through adaptation, adjustment, and accommodation to the natural processes we will discover a more harmonious connection to the planet.

From our realization of the limited powers of human control, we recognize our dependence on nature for life. I hold that it is impossible, knowing what we do about our cosmic neighborhood, to view ourselves as favored within nature's schemes and processes. We are one of many species seeking to further its life on this diminutive island in the vast sea of space.

For religious atheists spirituality is defined by the human and natural relatedness of life. I discover inspiration in the beauty and wonders of nature, and in the varied acts of human creativity. As physical beings, we can discover deeper and more profound levels of being human, and find inspiration in life, but never beyond the limits of our human existence.

Our survival and furtherance is possible only through cooperation and collaboration with one another. I affirm the need for human community as the very heart of our existence. Our efforts together can create meaningful and purposeful values for human living, and these values will enhance our sense of self, as well as bring us into the community of humanity. Greeley observes of this process of community building, "The religious atheist believes that life needs constant examination and evaluation...."³⁵ It is together that we can face the harsh realities of our human condition, as well as celebrate its wonders. As a religious atheist, I have no need for deity, but I cannot do without humanity; therefore, communion with others is crucial. Finally, Greeley states effectively the heart-felt desire of the religious atheist:

We UU atheists find that we have the same need for religious community as those who profess a belief in God. We desire the opportunity to celebrate our beliefs in a warm supportive atmosphere of ... religious community. We need the stimulation and challenge that such a community provides as we continue the process of developing and practicing our religious beliefs.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.