

*What's an Atheist Doing in a Pew? A sermon delivered to the
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
Thunder Bay, Ontario on Sunday, June 12, 2016*

Reading #1: “Different Kinds of Atheism” Sherwin Wine, quoted in *Good without God: What a Billion Non-Religious People Do Believe*, Greg Epstein

There are different kinds of atheism. The most popular kind is “ontological” atheism, a firm denial that there is any creator or manager of the universe.

There is “ethical” atheism, firm conviction that, even if there is a creator/manager of the world, he does not run things in accordance with the human moral agenda, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked.

There is “existential” atheism, a nervy assertion that even if there is a God, he has no authority to be the boss of my life.

There is “agnostic” atheism, a cautious denial that claims that God’s existence can be neither proved nor disproved; this type of atheist ends up with behavior no different from that of the ontological atheist.

There is “ignostic” atheism, another cautious denial, which claims that the word “God” is so confusing that it is meaningless; this belief, again, translates into the same behavior as the ontological atheist.

There is “pragmatic” atheism, which regards God as irrelevant to ethical and successful living, and which views all discussions about God as a waste of time....

But none of these terms has anything to do with what we *do believe*. [pp. 18-19; final line is Greg Epstein’s]

Reading #2: “Sentient Meat”

The setting is deep space, just beyond the range of Earth's best telescopes. The leader of the Fifth Explorer Force is speaking to the Commander in Chief...

They're made out of meat.

Meat?

Meat. They're made out of meat.

Just Meat?

There's no doubt about it. We picked several from different parts of the planet, took them aboard our recon vessels, probed them all the way through. They're completely meat.

That's impossible. What about the radio signals? The messages to the stars.

They use the radio waves to talk, but the signals don't come from them. The signals come from machines.

So who made the machines? That's who we want to contact.

They made the machines. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Meat made the machines.

That's ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You're asking me to believe in sentient meat.

I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in this sector and they're made out of meat.

Maybe they're like the Orfolei. You know, a carbon-based intelligence that goes through a meat stage.

Nope. They're born meat and they die meat. We studied them for several of their life spans, which didn't take too long. Do you have any idea the life span of meat?

Spare me. Okay, maybe they're only part meat. You know, like the Weddilei. A meat head with an electron plasma brain inside.

Nope. We thought of that, since they do have meat heads like the Weddilei. But I told you, we probed them. They're meat all the way through.

No brain?

Oh, there is a brain alright. It's just that the brain is made out of meat also.

So... what does the thinking?

You're not understanding, are you? The brain does the thinking. The meat.

Thinking meat??? *You're asking me to believe in thinking meat???*

Yes, thinking meat ! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you getting the picture?

Omigod. You're serious then. They're made out of meat.

Finally! Yes. They are indeed made out of meat. And they've been trying to get in touch with us for almost a hundred of their years.

So what does the meat have in mind?

First it wants to talk to us. Then I imagine it wants to explore the universe, contact other sentients, swap ideas and information. The usual.

We're supposed to talk to meat?

That's the idea. That's the message they're sending out by radio. 'Hello. Anyone out there? Anyone home?' That sort of thing.

They actually do talk then. They use words, ideas, concepts?

Oh, yes. Except they do it with meat.

I thought you just told me they used radio.

They do, but what do you think is on the radio? Meat sounds. You know how when you slap or flap meat it makes a noise? They talk by flapping a small opening of their meat at each other. They can even sing by squirting air through their meat.

Omigod. Singing meat. This is altogether too much. So what do you advise?

Officially or unofficially?

Both.

Officially, we are required to contact, welcome, and log in any and all sentient races or multi-beings in the quadrant, without prejudice, fear, or favor. Unofficially, I advise that we delete the records and forget the whole damn thing.

I was hoping you would say that.

It seems harsh, but there is a limit. I mean, do we really want to make contact with meat?

I agree one hundred percent. What's there to say? 'Hello, meat. How's it going?' But will this work? How many planets are we dealing with here?

Just one. They can travel to other planets in special meat containers, but they can't live on them. And being meat, they only travel through C space. Which limits them to the speed of light and makes the possibility of their ever making contact pretty slim. Infinitesimal, in fact.

So we just pretend there's no one home in the universe?

That's it.

Cruel. But you said it yourself, who wants to meet meat? And the ones who have been aboard our vessels, the ones you have probed? You're sure they won't remember?

They'll be considered crackpots if they do. We went into their heads and smoothed out their meat so that we're just a dream to them.

A dream to meat! How strangely appropriate, that we should be meat's dream.

And we can mark this sector unoccupied.

Good. Agreed, officially and unofficially. Case closed. Any others? Anyone interesting on that side of the galaxy?

Yes, a rather shy but sweet hydrogen core cluster intelligence in a class nine star in G445 zone. Was in contact two galactic rotations ago, wants to be friendly again.

Good. Good. They always come around. What say we get going?

<http://www.netjeff.com/humor/item.cgi?file=spacetravellers.txt>; accessed 16 February 2012.

Written by [Terry Bisson](#), from "Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories"

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Sermon: "What's an Atheist Doing in a Pew?" The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

What is an atheist doing, sitting in a pew?

Pews come in churches. Or mosques. Or temples. And those buildings come with religion.

And religion, well, religion has been the source of some epic religious missteps:

Witch hunts.

The Inquisition.

Crusades.

Jihads [in the worst, most inappropriate sense of the word].

Persecution of Muslims – or Christians as infidels.

Persecution of the Jews because they "killed Christ."

What is an atheist doing, sitting in that pew?

Pews come in churches, temples.

And those places come with hierarchies. Ministers. Priests. Deacons. Monsignors. Bishops. Archbishops. Popes. Monks. Imams. Rabbis. People who can order you around. Tell you what to believe.

Religion comes with creeds. And dogmas. And doctrines. All sorts of things we are expected to believe.

Heaven. Hell. Miracles. Original sin. Eve responsible for man's downfall.

Religions come with certain ideas, certain worldviews.

We are right. They are wrong.

In the United States, we are told, by the Religious Right, the country is going to hell in a hand basket because:

Folks believe in evolution,

Or believe in global climate change,

or because we read the liberal media and are bamboozled by their perspective.

The country is going to hell in a hand basket because:

Women, and men, are using contraceptives.

Kids are getting educated about the practicalities and nuances of sex.

Unmarried people are having sex.

People of the same gender are having sex.

Maybe worst of all, we now recognize same-sex marriage.

These changes are all due to the godless, secular humanists out there. On the frontlines of change. And sitting in the pews. [like those folks at Gretta Vosper's church in Scarborough, eh?]

What is a godless secular humanist doing, sitting in a pew?

Churches, temples, mosques come with religion.
And some of those religions have a very different worldview from your average atheist.

Churches and organized religion can be vicious, intolerant, self-righteous, filled with hypocrisy and paranoia. A bastion of patriarchy. Homophobic. Anti-science, the realm of the flat-landers.

And filled with folks who are just so certain about God. Of who God is. And what God looks like – He is certainly not some sweet hydrogen core cluster. Or a blazing electron plasma Divine Being. Nope. We are created in his image. So God must be sentient meat – just like His creation.

And these ultra-religious folks are equally certain they know what it is God wants us all to do.

So, what's an atheist, what's an agnostic, what's a secular humanist, what's an ignostic or a freethinker or an ethical rationalist doing in a pew?

Atheism, in its many iterations, has a long history.

Even in antiquity there were those who disbelieved in the gods, and they were labeled atheist. With the rise of science, the number of people who denied belief in the supernatural, the literalness of the Bible, rose. The number rose slowly. For centuries it was dangerous to say you questioned the orthodox certainties about God and creed and dogma. Being questioning, or non-conformist – being heterodox – not in accordance with established theological beliefs – was heretical. Heresy means choosing one's own beliefs. And being a heretic could be a punishable offense. Or even lethal. [Look at what happened to our anti-Trinitarian forebear, Michael Servetus in 1553 – some 550 years ago.]

In our own history, Universalist minister Abner Kneeland, was accused of atheism in the 1830s.

Kneeland preached in a number of parishes, and wrote pamphlets about his beliefs. And his beliefs became increasingly unorthodox. Kneeland believed that the scriptures came out of human experience rather than divine revelation. He believed in no period of punishment after death. He advocated the practice of birth control and spoke for women's rights. He insisted on free thought and the right of conscience. He believed that people's concept of God was a figment of their imagination, that the story of Jesus was a fable, that miracles did not happen, and that there is no eternal life.

Abner Kneeland's beliefs were considered blasphemous – utterances about God and sacred beliefs that were irreverent, profane.

Abner Kneeland holds the distinction of being the last person in the United States to be convicted and imprisoned for blasphemy. In 1832 he served sixty days in jail.

The last person hanged for blasphemy in Great Britain was Thomas Aikenhead, aged 20, in Scotland in 1697.

And a bit about blasphemy. Speaking about God or sacred beliefs in an irreverent manner.

Anti-blasphemy laws still exist in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Liechtenstein, Iceland, the Netherlands and San Marino. There are also "religious insult" laws in 21 European nations.^[8]

And, certainly, outside the Western world, laws against and punishment for blasphemy abound.

[We are reminded of the bombing of Charlie Hebdo bombing and the fatwa against author Salman Rushdie.]

Atheism is the absolute belief that there is no God or gods. And a number of UUs are atheists. Is this blasphemy?

In our congregations, around 20 percent of Unitarian Universalists say that God is an irrelevant concept and that the central focus of religion should be on human knowledge and values. Another 2 percent (of UUs) say God is a concept that is harmful to a worthwhile religion.

Indeed, back in the late 60s *Newsweek* reported that "to many mainstream Christians, Unitarians are largely atheistic intellectuals who can't kick the habit of going to church." (Mark W. Harris, *Unitarian Universalism from A to Z*, 29-30)

So atheism is an appropriate topic for religious discussion among us. [Religion in the broad sense that here we consider the depth and breadth of our connections to each other and to the world].

After the events of 9/11, a new discussion of atheism arose. A "new atheism."

The New Atheism has been marked by a variety of books in the past ten years. Neuroscientist [Sam Harris](#) wrote *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* in 2004, blaming the events of 9/11 on Islam, while also criticizing Christianity and Judaism. In 2006 biologist [Richard Dawkins](#) wrote *The God Delusion*. And in 2007 the British essayist and journalist [Christopher Hitchens](#) penned *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

New Atheism is intolerant of ignorance, myth and superstition. But New Atheism also believes that tolerance of religion, any sort of religion, is misguided, wrong-headed, if not downright dangerous.

New Atheism believes in logic, reason and the advancement of a naturalistic worldview. <http://newatheism.org/>; accessed 22 March 2012.

I understand why folks are drawn to these books. We here do believe in science. We are aware of the many ways religion has, and continues to, fall short of its ideals.

But, to me, the New Atheists are a bit like other fundamentalist religionists. Extreme cases of intolerance are generalized to an entire population, whatever the expression of their religion. New Atheists erect straw men – representing religion in its most egregious forms – and then handily knock them down. A middle ground for real conversation, nuanced discussion, is never opened.

I'm not a big fan of the new atheists. And, I must admit I have not read any of those books. [Except for one, *God, No!* by the magician Penn Jillette. I never finished it.]

The New Atheists revel in being caustic and oppositional. Their stance is a far cry from another, older doubter, the philosopher, poet, author George Santayana [1863-1952.] Santayana was an agnostic and what he called an "aesthetic Catholic." He is reputed to have said "There is no God and Mary is his Mother." The Unitarian Universalist minister Roger Brewin once started a sermon with these words. "Unitarians think there is one God and we don't believe in him."

So, what are all these non-believers doing, sitting in pews?

Lots of reasons.

We come for serious conversation with a community who will listen to, and accept, our nonbelief.

It's sometimes scary to publicly call oneself an atheist.

"Approximately half of all Americans say they would refuse to vote for a well-qualified atheist candidate for public office. In other words, one out of every two Americans admits to being prejudiced against fellow citizens who don't believe in God." (Greg M. Epstein, *Good without God*, x) only members of the Church of Scientology are less trusted.

Atheists and the irreligious can experience prejudice. A 2012 University of British Columbia study found that religious believers distrust atheists as much as they distrust rapists. The study also showed that atheists have lower employment prospects. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Atheism; accessed 22 March 2012.

But, a study last year [2015] in Canada [by a Lethbridge professor] showed that a full 27% of Canadians have a positive image of atheists. That's higher approval than for Sikhs, Mormons and Muslims; and the same approval rating as Hindus. Fully half of Canadians view atheism as neutral.

And only 22% hold negative perceptions of atheists. Evangelical Christians have a 27% disapproval rating. [35% hold negative opinions of Mormons; 44% of Muslims.

Saying one is an atheist only tells of one's non-belief in God. Space is rarely left for an atheist to enumerate in what he or she does believe. Sitting in that pew, being in church, may be a space to hear about, a space to talk about what is important, a spot to discern what is most important to us.

Why do atheist parents bring their children to church, especially to a Unitarian Universalist church?

Often, to learn about the beliefs of a variety of the world's religions. To be Biblically literate. To talk about ethics – about responsibility and accountability and what we owe to

each other. To know that one can be good without God. To learn about sex, how to approach it, how to talk about it honestly, how to engage in it responsibly – through Our Whole Lives programs.

Parents bring their kids to be a loving environment that will refute the idea that they will go to hell if they don't believe a certain way. We teach them that they are important. That what they do matters. That they can make a difference in the world. That they are in the world both to save and to savor it, "to build the common good, and [to] make [their] own days glad."

What's an atheist doing, sitting in a pew?

Just like our kids, to learn something about ethics, what scientist E. O. Wilson calls "a code of behavior we share on the basis of reason, law, honor, and an inborn sense of decency." (E. O. Wilson, *The Creation*, 4)

We come to hone our ideas about what it is we should do; how it is we should be with one another.

But, as French philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville writes in his *Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*: "Frankly, do you need to believe in God to be convinced that sincerity is preferable to dishonesty, courage to cowardice, generosity to egoism, gentleness and compassion to violence and cruelty, justice to injustice, love to hate? Of course not!" (22)

What's an atheist doing in a pew?

A new series of books explores the possibilities and defines what it is to be a spiritual skeptic or atheist.

Robert Solomon in his book *Spirituality for the Skeptic* defines spirituality as the "thoughtful love of life." (ix)

He goes on to say that spirituality, like philosophy, comes to grips with the big picture and... our need for a larger sense of our lives." (Solomon, 5)

Solomon argues that spirituality, like philosophy, involves those aspects of our lives that are not reducible to career strategies, personal psychology, civic responsibilities, or the fluctuation of our economic or romantic fortunes. Spirituality, like philosophy, involves those questions that have no ultimate answers, no matter how desperately our various doctrines and dogmas try to provide them." (Solomon, 5)

Questions like: Why are we here? Why am I here? What was before we were? What was before I was? How am I to live? How are we to live with one another? Why is there disease, suffering, pain, death?

We've all heard of the person involved in a serious accident, or diagnosed with a serious disease, or faced with a death. 'It makes you think about the really important things. It makes you think about what you should have been thinking about all along.' (Solomon, 6) In the pew we all – atheist, agnostic, theist, other – we all come to think about our "really important things".

Philosophy and religion author Sam Keen, in his latest book *In the Absence of God: Dwelling in the Presence of the Sacred*, challenges both modern religious and modern secular ideas and values. Keen writes of the "secular virtues" – what we are told by our culture, by TV, by the media to consider the "really important things" – an emphasis on consumption, consumerism, competition, and technical innovation – are ephemeral,

shallow, specious. Opposed to these secular virtues are “elemental emotions” – “innate responses to the human condition that spring from a source deep” within us. Elemental emotions include wonder, terror, anxiety, fascination, gratitude, joy, compassion, humility, reverence, and the feeling that we are all inextricably interdependent.

Keen argues that no god is necessary for us to experience wonder or fascination at the intricate workings of the natural world. No god is necessary for us to feel our absolute interdependence with the natural world and with our human community. No god is necessary for us to be compassionate, to say thank you early and often, to feel humbled before the majesty of the night sky or the mysteries of the atom. No god is necessary for us to feel that we walk on holy ground.

What is an atheist doing in a pew?

What are any of us doing in a pew?

Coming to church we are reminded of the holy, the healthy, the whole in our lives. We are reminded that a consumer society preys on our insecurity and our envy. We are reminded that we are descendants of the Big Bang, the Great Radiance, the Beginnings of the Cosmos – all made of stardust. Keen’s sort of spirituality is a way to re-enchant everyday life. Many science writers – E. O. Wilson, Ursula Goodenough, Stephen Jay Gould – write of science and nature with reverence, a sense of awe, and the majesty of it all. As the Jewish storyteller reminds us: “We are but dust and ashes. For us the world was made.”

We gather on a Sunday to figure out how to be the very best stardust we can be. We come to be reminded of this great gift of life, a gift we did not choose but must learn to use, with compassion and wisdom. We come to say “Yes” to life and truth and love.

We come to sing of light and peace. We sing our thanks for earth our homeland. A song of sun and sail, stars and wonder. A song of past and present, of hopes and dreams for the future of our world.

We come for the intellectual stimulation. We come to raise doubts, ask questions, confirm our world view. We come to remember the turning of the seasons, the holidays and holy days that mark the year’s passing. We come to voice our deepest concerns. We come to celebrate our important life passages. We come to mourn with one another – to acknowledge and emphasize and affirm the uniqueness of an individual and the sorrow we feel at her or his passing. We come for the companionship – a place where others know our name, part of our life story.

We come for the good coffee, the hot soup, the yummy ice cream social.

We come to a place we are recognized and honored and welcomed, for who are, and in what we believe. We need not think alike to love alike.

May it ever be so. May we make it so. Blessed be. Amen.