

## **Opening Words**

*This chalice burns for those who seek and defend the right to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning so that each person may live according to conscience in a democratically elected society.*

*May we tend this fire always, ever vigilant and courageous in the struggle for freedom and justice for all. Adapted from [Tracy Bleakney](#)*

### **Sermon: What's So New About the New Atheists?**

**By Terry Anderson, PhD.**

**Westwood Unitarian Congregation,**

**Edmonton Alberta, April 24 2016**

#### **Introduction**

I am sure you are wondering about two things- why anyone in their right mind would want to mount a Church Pulpit to talk about atheism. And secondly if I am going to admit to being an Atheist.

To the first question, I believe that sharing our thoughts and passions in a more structured and lengthy format than a Candle of Joy or concern is both a special right and a responsibility of Unitarian members. Like many of our other speakers from this place, I've learned a great deal from listening to the talks of others and while researching for this morning's talk. I look forward to sharing some of my discoveries with you this morning.

Secondly, I do admit to being an atheist. If one defines Atheism as "one who doesn't believe in a god", then everyone in this room is also an atheist. Our species has been around for somewhere between 150 and 300,000 years. During that time thousands of communities, nations and civilizations have come and gone – and all that we know about have worshiped or owned some type of god and most often numerous gods. I don't believe in any of these extinct gods and so like you, I am an atheist at least in respect to these untold numbers of gods. I'm also an atheist because I believe in only one fewer gods than most Christians, Jews and Moslems.

Scholars have traced atheistic thinking back through Greek, Roman and Indian civilizations, but the term became popular in English speaking countries only in the 19th century. The term ‘New Atheist’ was coined by a journalist, Gary Wolf in Wired Magazine in 2006 in reference to a group of popular authors including Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Victor J. Stenger. These gentlemen are scientifically-orientated, social commentators who are enjoying wide spread book sales and speaking opportunities. This talk explores the ideas, concerns and criticisms of New Atheism and what it offers to and challenges us as Unitarians.

Atheism or religious humanism is not just a matter of historical or modern curiosity, at least as far as Unitarian Universalism is concerned. A 1998 study of American Unitarians reported that 46 percent of Unitarian Universalists<sup>1</sup> regarded themselves as theologically humanist—more than twice the number who identified with the second most common perspective, nature-centered spirituality, and far more than the 13 percent who called themselves theists or the 9.5 percent who described themselves as Christians.

But the surprising thing is that despite this large number of humanists, Atheism is rarely discussed nor preached from this pulpit. A few months ago I was trying to make some sense and order in my personal library and realized that I had 9 different books on Atheism, most of which were written by authors labeled “New Atheists. Thus, the idea and the motivation to share my interest in Atheism with you this morning.

First to clear up a few definitions. A theist is someone who believes in a god and that god is capable of and often does interfere in human affairs and thus He (and they are almost always male gods), needs to be placated, pleaded with and flattered. A Deist believes that there is a god who set the universe in process, but who refuses to or is unable to interfere in its unfolding. An atheist believes that there is no supernatural God or supreme being.

The New Atheists are generally not content to let religious believers indulge their fantasies and to live and let live. Rather in some cases they accuse the religious of being delusional and therefore incompetent to act as political, social, military, social or even business leaders. They note delusional individuals may perpetrate great suffering to others (and there are many actual examples both from secular and religious histories) while acting under the influence of that delusion.

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<sup>1</sup> William Shultz 2003 <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/unitarian-universalisms->

## **Delusions**

So let's look at delusions

Story of my Mom and Solanna:

Wikipedia defines delusion as “ a belief held with strong conviction despite superior evidence to the contrary.” Similarly, the Encyclopedia of Mental Disorders defines delusions as “irrational beliefs, held with a high level of conviction, that are highly resistant to change even when the delusional person is exposed to forms of proof that contradict the belief.” However this encyclopedia goes on to note that “for beliefs to be considered delusional, the content or themes of the beliefs must be uncommon in the person's culture or religion”<sup>2</sup>. So, incredible as it may sound, IF a belief is shared by enough people, it is no longer a delusion. Or, for example if you believe in the Congolese god of Fire – it is a delusion, but if you believe in a God who talks through a burning bush, you are a good Christian or Jew. Obviously New Atheists do NOT concur with this theistic exception to the definition of delusion.

### **Our language and what it means in our community?**

One of the challenges we face as Unitarian-Universalists is that we try to don some of the traditional garments of religion (singing hymns, listening to sermons like this one, meditating, etc.) while trying to allow the proudly non-religious to find a welcoming home. One of the interesting challenges of this double agent life is illustrated when we refer to ourselves as a Faith community.

The influential American New Atheist Sam Harris writes about his reaction to supernatural beings argues that “The only angels we need invoke are those of our better nature: reason, honesty, and love. The only demons we must fear are those that lurk inside every human mind: ignorance, hatred, greed, and faith, which is surely the devil's masterpiece. P. 226

I am of course not going to let the opinions of an outspoken American like Sam Harris dictate my truths, but it does make me just a bit uncomfortable when I (and others) describe Westwood Unitarian as a ‘faith community’. If

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.minddisorders.com/Br-Del/Delusional-disorder.html#ixzz3xcr9S1i5>

Harris refers to Faith as “the devil’s masterpiece” I experience just a little cognitive dissonance. So of course I had to look up the definition of Faith.

At least the most humorous definition was supplied by Archie Bunker who defined faith as “something you believe in that nobody in their right mind would believe in”<sup>3</sup>

However more seriously, Dictionary definitions of the word Faith often provide multiple meanings. Merriam-Webster gives us three definitions:

(1) *allegiance to duty or a person* : I like loyalty!

(2) *sincerity of intentions as in Acting in good faith* - Obviously we value allegiance, fidelity and forms of sincerity or *something that is believed especially with strong conviction* Again Unitarians have never been known for weakly held ideas.

But it is the third and perhaps most common definition that gives me and many Atheists problems.

(3) is “*belief and trust in and loyalty to God (2) : belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion b (1) : firm belief in something for which there is no proof (2) : complete trust*”

By definition, atheists don’t have belief, trust, nor express loyalty to God, thus to describe myself as a member of Faith community causes me some concern.

I’m not suggesting that we can or should eliminate the use of the term “Faith” but we should know that it may mean something to another that it doesn’t mean to you. Let me give another example of language challenges.

I struggle with “spirits”. – not only of the alcoholic type. Unitarians use and refer to spirits, especially as they are invoked in Pagan services that we celebrate here at Westwood at Solstice and other seasonal celebrations. So I had to look up dictionary definitions of “spirit”. I was reassured to find that Merriam-Webster provides 8 different definitions and use of the word spirit, only one of which references supernatural beings. So unlike Faith with a one of three chance of unacceptable definitions, Spirit has a much less (only 1 in 8) chance of offending!

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<sup>3</sup> from Stenger, 2009 p. 45

So do we continue to use language with multiple and potentially divisive meanings? I think we should be very careful when we use language associated with theistic concepts when we are referring to our collective selves. It has taken years for most Unitarian to remove references to God from their Hymnals and pulpits, but we retain many very loaded religious terms and I argue do so at a cost of inclusion.

### **Back to New Atheists**

New Atheists are some of the most well educated and intelligent people on the planet. They write and speak very convincingly and many of the now classic works of Richard Dawkins, Americans Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens have become widely read best-sellers. For example “The God Delusion,” has sold more than 3 million copies and has been translated into 31 languages.

The new Atheists are NOT just grumpy old men (though they are largely men and mostly old), nor are they stodgy intellectuals. Rather they are very articulate, with a fine sense of humour and they shine in the public spotlight whether on a stage or in front of a television camera.

Unlike older 18th and 19th century atheists the new atheists do not engage in long arguments over god’s existence. Rather they hold a forgone conclusion that there is no scientific evidence to support theist views and that the existence of God cannot be either proven or disproven, to an extent that most believers or skeptics will change their views. Again delusions are by definition, very hard to challenge or change.

Thus getting beyond arguing if God exists or not is evidence of a maturing of atheistic thinking that is common in academic disciplines. For example in my own field of distance education for many years the dominant research questions was – is distance education (in any form) better or worse than classroom learning? We don’t ask that question any more and I’ve successfully dissuaded many graduate students from attempting to focus on that question in their graduate research. Why? Because in 100’s of studies conducted over the past 30 years the results of such comparisons are almost always the same- there is no significant difference in learning outcomes. This is because teaching and learning is impacted by so many other variables – like the learning design, the attention and motivation of the learner, the skill of the teacher, and even the time of year and temperature in the room and host of other non controllable variables that would make a simple answer at best unconvincing and at worst wrong.

Like religious followers, there are many educators who have convinced themselves that nothing is better than a face-to-face classroom with 15 or less students- and no amount of empirical evidence to the contrary seems to alter their opinions. So New Atheists' simply dismiss the question. The existence for God or God(s) has not and cannot be proven, so lets talk about more interesting topics. These topics often focus on the pragmatic results of believing in God or the personal or social benefits of believe or non belief.

Secondly, New Atheists, following the lead of many “old atheists”, are profoundly interested in scientific ideas and use modern science and scientific arguments to bolster their arguments. In fact a common criticism of New Atheists is to accuse them of “scientific fundamentalism” or “scientism”. Scientism contends that “empirical science is the only source of our knowledge of the world (strong scientism) or, more moderately, the best source of rational belief about the way things are (weak scientism)<sup>4</sup>. This is of course somewhat problematic to many of us, including many Unitarians, who often place high value on moral, artistic and aesthetic value propositions and performances – which cannot easily be “proven” by normal science to be worthwhile. Typically, New Atheists admit that all phenomena including Gods, challenging hypothesis and supposed supernatural activities must be validated by scientific investigation and the use of empirical evidence. However, they also note the value of poetry, art, music, drama and other creative activities of humans. They celebrate the considerable scientific knowledge that is used to create new and better musical instruments and acoustics in theatres, new colors and artistic media and extensive communications technology that allow the arts to flow into our homes and schools.

The profound and increasing speed of scientific discovery provides immense opportunity for New Atheists to demonstrate solutions and remove ignorance. Lord Percy Shelley in the 19th Century noted that “every time we say that God is the author of some phenomena, that implies that we are ignorant of how such phenomena was caused by the forces of nature.” Indeed, the very question of the origin of life is now being answered by evolutionary biologists. These scientist are uncovering evidence of how the very earliest bacteria managed to gain evolutionary value by combining to form multiple-use cell organisms at the very earliest stages of life and from which all forms of plant and animal life has evolved on this planet.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/>.

## **What do New Atheists' think about religion”**

Most atheists have trouble with religion, seeing it as at best the “opiate of the masses” and at worst as a repressive institution. New Atheists recognize the power and influence of religious thinking, but many believe that the adaptive value of religious tribalism has been under radical evolutionary pressure in immediate globalized times and now serves more as a deterrent to human social development and evolution than an empowering institution.

New Atheists are bolstered by scientific developments and knowledge not only from the hard sciences but also from archaeology, anthropology, sociology and psychology. Perhaps the best and most well known New Atheist is the Oxford University evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins who has studied the Evolutionary biology of religion in human development. New Atheists generally believe that religion and religious belief are by-products of something else that has survival value.

Dawkins specific hypothesis is that human beings invented and acquired religious beliefs because there is a selective advantage to child brains that readily believe and follow the instructions of adults around them. We are wired to learn and those who learn best- even if the learning includes erroneous ideas, have the best chance of survival and propagating. Other evolutionary orientated New Atheists discuss a variety of “social solidarity theories”, in which religion provides a coordinating and organizing function allowing individuals, families and tribes to work together with a common purpose or rationale. Others argue that religion makes us more productive by reducing the terror of the unknown by providing a sort of after-life insurance. Of course atheists have also argued that this “terror of the unknown” was created by religious ideas in the first place, so providing solutions to problems that they themselves have created is hardly a significant theological contribution to social life.

Many New Atheists also speculate that religion plays a selfish role much like the cast system and that members of certain religions use their membership to extend their social advantage. Many social institutions such as elite universities function to insure that those with like social advantage are more likely to meet others of similar caste and promote gene mixing of other privileged people. Religion also likely plays this role in modern societies.

Religion also serves human development as a vehicles for Meme's – successful ideas that like genes, propagate across human generations and perform a “survival of the fittest” advantages to human groups.

The New Atheists are also very strident in their condemnation of the evil that religion has brought to the world. John Grey in his book “**Black Mass Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia**”, demonstrates how religion creates and sustains world crisis and war. He makes a compelling, Atheist claim that religion and its subversion into Nazism and communism are the primary cause of most human atrocities committed by followers in recent history. He examines Middle East, suicide bombers and notes the utopian visions that inspire terrorist activities and how their religious roots continuously lead to death and destructions. Obviously, **Al-Qaeda** and the Taliban are easy to focus on. But even Jesus and his early followers were convinced they were living in “end times” and some support from the religious right for Israel comes from a belief that the State of Israel's existence will hasten the Return of Jesus and the end of time. This sense of immediate destruction or its opposite nirvana provides license for people to routinely and systematically persecute and murder other humans. Grey claims that Nazism, communism, fascism and even rabid capitalism each have religious roots based on a belief that some pseudo scientific rationale, emanating from religious thinking provides both a rationale and motivation for many of the most extreme atrocities and genocide that humans have inflicted on each other, Indeed, these inflictions, from the biblical justification of human dominion over the earth and the other living creatures upon it, can be blamed on the current ecological and global warming catastrophes that threaten us.

Grey picks up on the psychological basis of delusion by arguing that these destructive millennium and utopian delusions are “ symptoms of a type of cognitive dissonance in which normal links between perception and reality have broken down” In other words the religious fanatic is no longer responsible for their own actions, but rather is giving their actions and the liability for these actions over to dubious and often evil religious belief.

But the message from the New Atheists is not all doom and gloom. They are generally supportive of the very real and promise of well being that human and especially scientific efforts have brought to health care, communications, the arts and at least a promise to our environment.



Interestingly, there is a growing understanding, led by Alan Bottom in his book 'Religion for Atheists', that atheists can get beyond the "odour of religion". Religion has and still contributes much to music, art, education, our sense of tenderness, community and forgiveness and thus religion can sporadically be "useful, interesting and consoling". I argue that Unitarian Universalism with its long history of engagement and support of humanists and free thinkers is in an ideal position to demonstrate the "sporadic value" of religion and win support from committed atheists.

Going even further, American Sam Harris' latest book is *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*. In which he talks about the values of positive emotions such as compassion and serenity and the value of meditation and self-transcendence. Harris differentiates spiritual practices from supernatural linkages ascribed to the experience by most adherents of one religion or another. He confesses that "I used to consider the world's religions to be intellectual ruins, maintained at enormous economic and social cost, but now I understand that important psychological truths can be found in the rubble" (p. 5).

Finally, what distinguishes New Atheists from old, is their media literacy. They each have attractive web sites, do many talks and eagerly engage in debates, write newspaper articles and do TV interviews.

### **Atheists and Unitarians**

So is there a way to reconcile and welcome Atheists, Freethinkers, Skeptic's and Humanists to our Unitarian movement and to Westwood Congregation?

Let's first look at one of our Founding Sources of our Faith as defined in the bylaws of the UUA. One of these founding sources is acknowledged and affirmed as "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit". This a bit of an anomaly in the list of Sources of Faith in that all of the other roots are written in plain, easy to understand English. How many of us even understand what "idolatries of the mind and spirit" means? Well fortunately, I could consult with Mr. Google and found a number of UU sermons on the topic. In a nutshell this 'warning' is to not to take either science (mind) or arts (spirit) so seriously or dogmatically that we blind ourselves to useful knowledge from either domain.

One of the problems that Atheism poses for Unitarians is our 4th principle to affirm "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning". Atheists often

have trouble empathizing with religious adoration or thinking- perceiving it as a human weakness, rather than “a responsible search for truth”. They may even argue that the 4th principle is dangerous because many religious beliefs are (to them) profoundly erroneous and any meaning that derives from them is suspect, if not dangerous to both that individual and to those with whom they interact. Ironically Christopher Hitchens, a notable “new atheist” writer has been criticized by many on the left and found grudging approval from the religious right for his forthright attacks on the forces represented by Al Qaeda and the Taliban claiming that they are “fairly easy to understand, but very hard to live with”. In particular New Atheists have been accused of being white and almost all male (a crime of many Unitarians as well) and that they are anti-Muslim. Sam Harris is quoted as saying “The abysmal treatment of women, the hostility to free speech, the daily bloodletting between Sunni and Shia and suicide bombers have absolutely nothing to do with U.S. foreign policy or the founding of Israel.” Harris’ web site at <https://www.samharris.org/blog/item/sam-harris-the-salon-interview>

Harris got into a very public battle of words with the venerable Canadian Scholar from Harvard, Noam Chomsky both of who wrote books on the 9/11 terrorists. Chomsky described the culpability of the West and the terrorist activities of the US government and Harris countered with evidence that the final instructions found at 3 of the 4 residences of the 9/11 suicide terrorists were religious instructions from the Koran and other religious sources – having nothing to say about western activities. These instructions intone the bombers to “Consider that this is a raid on a path. As the Prophet said: ‘A raid on the path of God is better than this World and what is in it’”.

I like many Unitarians agree with the profound challenges faced within the Muslim world, but do not whitewash the culpability of oil greed and political indifference of western and Israeli politicians as culpable in the emergence of terrorist groups.

### **What can we learn? What do Atheists – old and new need and value**

There does seem to be an essential human “spiritual energy” that has been displaced among many competing interests in modern society. The largest single religious group in Canada, and the fastest growing, is those who declare themselves as having “no religion” – however many also say they are spiritual. Thus there is a need to bridge this chasm – from no religion to a meaningful spiritual life.

Many Atheists value and still have need for rights of passage ceremonies, be members of carrying communities, have a chance to sing and meditate with others. But there are few natural homes for hosting or participating in a non-theist, yet spiritual context. Indeed, some of the more popular New Atheists have been denigrated by religious liberals for being “atheist fundamentalists”. Meaning, they act as intolerantly and generally are as objectionable as other types of religious fundamentalists. But fighting Atheism with charges of ‘atheistic fundamentalism’ only serves to denigrate and marginalize and further it challenges our support for both the 1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person and the 3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

Many of us realize the value of face-to-face and online community – not just the relatives or friends we grew up with. But rather a celebration of community within a context that accepts the search for meaning and truth, but that doesn’t depend upon supernatural or delusional ideas or beings.

New Atheists share a fundamental Unitarian belief that moral behaviour is independent of religious doctrine. As Unitarians we expect to act with high moral value seeking “justice, equality and compassions in human relations”. We do this not because of religious rules or a single set of religious tenants, but rather we believe that moral behaviour arises as result of us caring and loving one another and wishing of them the type of ethical treatment that we desire and expect for ourselves. From an evolutionary perspective, we believe that we can be more successful by treating each other with high moral value and behaviour, than if we act immorally towards each other. And we are not obliged to look for or base our ethical behaviour on religious proclamations or mystic insights.

The goal of social societies around the world cannot and should not be universal truths but rather a mosaic of truths. Indeed we should abandon a search for truth and focus on a search for peace that allows us to live with each other in a responsible way and with all of the other living creatures on our planet. There is no single truth when it comes to many religious questions. Interesting is our 6 principle – Goal of world community with peace as a central tenant. Unitarians with their inclusive DNA have much to offer from the 3rd principle of acceptance of one another and, through to the 7th - honouring of the interdependent web of life.

Given the large and growing number of people who identify themselves as atheists, can we reasonably expect to attract these people to our Unitarian congregations? Well we face challenges. A couple of years we invited four representatives of the University Atheist Club to speak at a summer serendipity service. During the discussion, I raised my hand and asked these members if they were attracted to or comfortable in Unitarian churches which at least on the surface accept Atheists as one of many paths of a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. They responded that we are too churchy! Indeed we meet in a building that looks like (and was) a Church, on Sunday morning- traditional meeting time of Christian churches and even call our gatherings “worship services” Just what or who are we worshipping??

Thus, the New Atheists challenge Unitarians to make sure that their anti-theist beliefs are both respected and acknowledged within our services, customs and practices. This is perhaps most challenging and a bit perplexing as we see the growth of pagan and New Age practices here at Westwood and other Unitarian Churches at a time when many are rejecting spiritual ideas that include delusional spirits and beings. We need to be aware of the sensitivities in our language and our customs that can offend or at least alienate many atheists and freethinkers.

**Now for the part of this talk you’ve been waiting for – the conclusion**

**Conclusion:**

The New Atheists, like their predecessors challenge both the religious and the non-religious, to think and re-think our understanding of nature and of the humans and other animals and plants that share our wondrous planet. But Unitarians have nothing to fear and much to gain from heeding their admonitions, their insights and their often skilled capacity to argue and to promote an interesting topic.

I am encouraged to know that the Unitarian Universalist Humanists in the US have recently developed a new **Free Thinker Friendly Congregation** program by which UU congregations can affirm their support for atheists, humanists, agnostics and non-theists. This program was modeled after the Welcoming Congregation program which we, and most Unitarian Churches went through some years ago – with I believe very positive results.

Susan and I have introduced a motion for our annual meeting next month that asks us to become (what I believe will be) Canada’s first Free Thinking

Friendly Congregation. The criteria to be recognized as a Free Thinking Friendly congregation includes:

1. an examination of our language and practice and an explicit recognition that acceptance of all religious faith, includes those with no religious faith.
2. A responsibility to educate ourselves about atheist viewpoints and issues. To partially address this need, I hope to run a New Atheists reading group next fall.
3. Finally, we are asked to reach out to the wider Atheist community and publically endorse the separation of religion from all forms of government action and authority.

I hope you will read the criteria for this designation in your annual meeting package and come ready to support the motion at our meeting next month.

Perhaps I can leave you with a question to discuss with at least one other person over coffee this morning. Are we welcoming freethinking atheists and agnostics to our religious community here at Westwood and can we insure that their search for truth is respected as much as that of any other theist, deist or pantheist believer's. Are we at Westwood prepared to examine our words and our practice in light of the guidelines provided by the UU Humanist Association so as to be able to proudly affirm that Westwood is a Free Thinking Friendly congregation?

Let me end with a quote from one of my favourite authors and scientists Carl Sagan.

Sagan wrote *“Atheism is more than just the knowledge that gods do not exist, and that religion is either a mistake or a fraud. Atheism is an attitude, a frame of mind that looks at the world objectively, fearlessly, always trying to understand all things as a part of nature.*

I have enjoyed the opportunity to read and re-read some of the new Atheist books for preparation of this sermon. I hope you have enjoyed and learned from the experience as well.

Thank you.

### **Closing words:**

The following is a rough translation that is attributed to Siddhārtha Gautama - the Buddha

Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumoured by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.”