

Why Atheists Go to Church

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The following reading is from a friend's blog:

where is that next place? it's one thing if you have faith, if you have a set of the rules of some kind of religion guiding you. but i do not. and how exactly does one choose? put on them all on the table ... none of them sound all that great and do require, well, faith in the story that they are telling you. but i do believe that there's a place after this, that there was some point to the pain and the laughter and the things we can't control but have to deal with anyway. some place where we see each other at least one more time, where we have the understanding and capability to say how little we knew during our time in this place ... some place where we can understand how the way we lived had an effect on how others lived ... some place where we can realize it all but somehow be ok with it, be ready to forgive, be ready to understand...be ready to move forward in whatever system we're a part of without the baggage of this place ... this heaven and hell.

ah ... heaven and hell, ... it's this place, the here and now where we ask ourselves "what are we doing and what's the whole point?" i have no answer to that, my friends ... and i don't believe in the mythology that we grasp onto that start wars and anger and death ... but i believe ... i believe that there is some point, some point to all the crying that happens when we get home ...

Why would an atheist go to church? I know that this looks like just another catchy title for our marquee sign, but I have often been asked this question when people learn that we have a significant number of professed atheists in our congregations. I have an overly simplistic answer to this question: For the same reason everyone else goes to church.

Perhaps you've heard the story of Sam and the Rabbi. The Rabbi is talking to Sam, a regular attendee at temple, but an avowed atheist. The Rabbi says, "Sam, everybody knows you don't believe in God, but I see you here every Sabbath. Why do you come to temple?" Sam says, "You know my friend Bernie? He comes to temple to talk to God. I come to talk to Bernie."

I recently heard about an informal study of why people joined a particular church. They joined because the church was in the neighborhood, because a friend invited them, because they liked the windows, because they enjoyed the music, because the people were friendly, because the sermons were interesting, and so on. None said they joined because of their particular belief or disbelief in God or anything else. Some people do go to church to talk to God. Some people go to talk to each other.

According to a 1989 survey by the Unitarian Universalist Association, about 7% of members of Unitarian Universalist churches consider themselves to be primarily atheist. Only 3% identified themselves as an agnostic or skeptic. Of course, every good agnostic will tell you that because there is no way to either prove or to disprove the existence of God, being a theist or an atheist is an illogical proposition. About 15%

identified as Christian, and over 50% identify as humanist. When asked which one of the following statements comes closest to expressing their view about God, 4% said God was a supernatural being; 28% said God was the “ground of all being (using theologian Paul Tillich’s description); 49% said God was some natural process in the tradition of the process theologians; 18% said God was an irrelevant concept and 2% said God was a harmful concept.

So, having been asked the question often I wanted to hear from some atheists why they go to church. I got many answers, both from some of you and from folks around the country. The answers were: because their wives make them; because of the fellowship and the community; to disguise their atheism, especially during child custody disputes and when running for political office; habit; for their parents; for the children; because the first time they attended a UU church the service was about the spiritual practice of kite flying. One atheist said because their friend Bernie, well in this case it was Butch, told him he didn’t have to check his brain at the door of the church.

I was interested that all of the reasons given spoke to practical matter. Not surprising, I suppose, but I believe the answer to why atheists or anyone goes to church, whether they consciously know it or not, goes deeper and speaks to the very nature of what makes us human, and to the core assumptions of what it is to be a religious institution.

People who have asked me why atheists would go to church are generally theists. The assumption behind their question is that atheists have no legitimate reason to go to church because one goes to church primarily to worship God and to seek eternal life. This, of course, is not the assumption of the atheist. Although it may be a *sufficient* reason for some to come to church, understanding where we came from and where we are going are not *necessary* reasons for everyone who comes to church.

One member of this church told me recently:

It is possible to be spiritual without having a belief in god. Sometimes the topics are off-beat, and we can have an entire service without mentioning god, so in those cases, what attracts the theists to attend? Probably the same thing that attracts the atheists. I think we have more in common than people like to admit.

Sometimes, when people come to a Unitarian Universalist church, they remark that there is a real difference in the content of the service, but they aren’t usually able to articulate exactly what that difference is beyond our use of various religious and secular sources. The primary difference is that in UU churches, we don’t spend the majority of the service offering praise and glory to God. Most other Christian churches do and have done so since the formation of the church nearly 2000 years ago. But, some of us believe in God and some of us do not. Regardless of our belief in a deity, we all offer gratitude and reverence to and for many things, including the earth that sustains us, the fellowship of others, the mysteries of the universe over which we do not have control, and our good fortune in this miracle we call life.

How we got here and where we are going seem to be the concern of many, but not all religions and religious communities. I believe there is another universal reason that everyone who regularly participates in a religious community does so. This goes beyond our social and aesthetic affections. Everyone who regularly attends church of their own

free will does so because they want to be part of a community. We want to be part of a community because we seek a sense of belonging. And we seek belonging because we humans are makers of meaning. Not to make meaning of our lives is to risk our own survival. There are other ways to make meaning in one's life outside of a religious community. But everyone within a religious community, atheist and otherwise, is at some level on a quest for meaning.

After I spoke last week about hope and the dangers of falling into existential hopelessness, someone asked me whether I thought that existentialism was a nihilistic philosophy—basically a philosophy of meaninglessness. I said that I thought that it could be, but didn't have to be. Existentialism—being in touch with our very existence—can also be a healthy philosophy of understanding meaning and purpose. We don't exist except in relationship. Life is not an individual proposition. I think even most atheists would agree.

If we accept the proposition that everyone, theist, atheist, agnostic, and otherwise who participates in a religious community does so ultimately to find meaning in their lives, then we need to understand what that age old question, "What is the meaning of life?" really means. I have often said that the meaning of life is giving meaning to life. The Rev. Frank Schulman, whom many of you knew, and who passed away in January, said, we were not sent to this earth to be idle." He also said to Rev. Terry Sweetser in discussing his own memorial service, "I wish I'd spent more time helping than I did criticizing." By being active and helpful rather than idle or critical, we cannot help but give meaning to life. And this is the meaning of life.

If you haven't read Victor Frankl's classic work *Man's Search for Meaning*, written shortly after World War II and first published in English by Beacon Press in 1959, then I highly recommend it. Beacon Press (which is a publishing house of the Unitarian Universalist Association) has just reissued it. Victor Frankl was a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. The book is both a recollection of his experiences and the development of logotherapy as a psychotherapeutic technique. Logos means meaning. I am somewhat embarrassed to say that I am just now reading this important book, which I wish I had read many years ago. A 1991 survey by the Library of Congress and the Book-of-the-Month Club found that *Man's Search for Meaning* was one of the ten most influential books in America.

I mention all of this because I like Victor Frankl's response to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" better than my own response. He says, "The meaning of life differs from [person to person], from day to day, from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment." (Frankl, p. 108)

And I think this is where there is a difference between the theist and the atheist, at least in their views about creation. I think that many theists often put ultimate meaning in the hands of God. But atheists recognize the need to use their own hands. Most theists look to the promise of eternal life as part of the meaning of life. Atheists look to their own lives, here and now in company with others, for meaning.

Frankl says:

To put the question in general terms would be comparable to the question posed

to a chess champion: “Tell me, Master, what is the best move in the world?” There simply is no such thing as the best or even a good move apart from a particular situation in a game and the particular personality of one’s opponent. The same holds for human existence. One should not search for an abstract meaning of life.

He recommends changing subject to object by not asking what the meaning of our own life is, but realizing that it is we who are asked. We are questioned *by* life, and we must respond if we are to survive. Frankl said that that the meaning of his life was to help others find the meaning in theirs.

I’d like to move this concept of making meaning back into the real world. You might have read the essay in the Houston Chronicle in March 2006 titled “Why this Atheist is a Christian (sort of).” It was written by Robert Jensen a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He begins his essay with:

I don’t believe in God.

I don’t believe Jesus Christ was the son of a God that I don’t believe in, nor do I believe Jesus rose from the dead to ascend to a heaven that I don’t believe exists.

Given these positions, this year I did the only thing that seemed sensible: I formally joined a Christian church.

He goes on to say that his decision was not at all a theological one but a move to engage himself and others politically and morally. He joined the church because the people there “expect to engage fundamental questions about what it means to be human and the obligations we owe each other.” We come to church to make meaning of our own lives and we come to church to make meaning of the world. Not in any general, abstract sense, but each moment of each day because we are not human beings as much as we are human becomings. Whether or not we are concerned about the existence of God and our fate after this life, we all come to church to *BEcome* something better than we are now. We come to church because we yearn for the world to become a better place by engaging in the issues of ultimate importance. God isn’t going to save us or condemn us to eternal damnation. Only *we* can do either. Jensen continues with:

The debate is not just at the level of arguments over whether, for example, certain Old Testament passages should be interpreted to condemn homosexuality. The deeper struggle is over whether Christianity is to be understood as a closed set of answers that leads to the intensification of these boundaries, or as an invitation to explore questions that help people transcend boundaries. Such a struggle is going on not only within Christianity, but in all the major world religions.

The task of religion, paradoxically, is to bring into being a world based on the universal values that underlie most major theological and philosophical systems—compassion, empathy, solidarity, dignity.

I hope most of you go to church to make a difference in the world. Jensen joined a church to make that difference from the inside out. Some people say we aren't supposed to talk politics in church. That is usually a sign to me that someone is trying to control rather than empower someone else. Separation of church and state means that the state doesn't get to control the church and more importantly that no individual church gets to control the state. It doesn't mean we shouldn't talk politics in church. Quite the contrary, there is no better place to be engaged in those issues that are critically important to our own survival and demise, and that of our society and world. There is no way we are going to make ourselves and this world a better place unless we do so. We can play by the rules and we can be responsible in our activism, but *we* need to be engaged as a liberal religious community in meaning making, in advocating for true human freedom when our government tries to control the church and tries to control our morality by denying basic human rights and calling it freedom. We need to be engaged as a liberal religious community when our government tries to promote one brand of religion over others as sacred; when church and state concentrate their efforts on condemning the few, seemingly to shore up their own self-interest. We need to promote compassion, empathy, solidarity, and dignity of all human beings when our government and state continue to wage war against others, resulting in more rather than less hostility. We need to take back faith, religion, and our own lives from those who claim to know the only path of salvation and who would stifle us into passive inaction so that they can promote their own self-interest.

Whether you are atheist, theist, agnostic, or don't really care, I'm am glad that you are here for your parents, for your children, because your spouse made you, because of kites, because the church was in the neighborhood, because a friend invited you, because you enjoy the music, because the people are friendly. Whether you came to talk to God or to talk to Bernie, I am glad you are here. I hope that we can come together to make meaning of our lives and this troubled world, by making both better. The meaning of life is to help others to find meaning in theirs.

That's why atheists come to church.