

**17 August, 2008 \* The New Atheism**  
**Rev. Erika Hewitt \* Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

**Reading:** excerpt (pp. 44-46) from *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris

It is time we recognized that belief is not a private matter; it has never been merely private... [E]very belief is a fount of action *in potentia*. The belief that it will rain puts an umbrella in the hand of every man or woman who owns one. It should be easy enough to see that belief in the full efficacy of prayer, for instance, becomes an emphatically *public* concern the moment it is actually put into practice: the moment a surgeon lays aside his... instruments and attempts to suture his patients with prayer, or a pilot tries to land a passenger jet with nothing but repetitions of the word “Hallelujah” applied to the controls, we are swiftly delivered from the provinces of private faith to those of a criminal court.

As a man believes, so he will act. Believe that you are the member of a chosen people, awash in the salacious exports of an evil culture that is turning your children away from God, believe that you will be rewarded with an eternity of unimaginable delights by dealing death to these infidels – and flying a plane into a building is scarcely more than a matter of being asked to do it. It follows, then, that certain beliefs are *intrinsically* dangerous. We all know that human beings are capable of incredible brutality, but we would do well to ask, What sort of ideology will make us *most* capable of it?...

Given the link between belief and action, it is clear that we can no more tolerate a diversity of religious beliefs than a diversity of beliefs about epidemiology and basic hygiene. There are still a number of cultures in which the germ theory of disease has yet to put in an appearance, where people suffer from a debilitating ignorance on most matters relevant to their physical health. Do we “tolerate” these beliefs? Not if they put our own health in jeopardy.

Even apparently innocuous beliefs, when unjustified, can lead to intolerable consequences. Many Muslims, for instance, are convinced that God takes an active interest in women’s clothing. While it may seem harmless enough, the amount of suffering that this incredible idea has caused is astonishing. The rioting in Nigeria over the 2002 Miss World Pageant claimed over 200 lives; innocent men and women were butchered with machetes or burned alive simply to keep that troubled place free of women in bikinis. Earlier in the year, the religious police in Mecca prevented paramedics and firefighters from rescuing scores of teenage girls trapped in a burning building. Why? Because the girls were not wearing the traditional head covering that Koranic law requires. 14 girls died in the fire; 50 were injured. Should the Muslims really be free to believe that the Creator of the universe is concerned about hemlines?

## Sermon: “The New Atheism”

When I open a newspaper, two sections compete for my attention: the police blotter (which is always strangely entertaining) and the obituaries. On the same day that I read the first half of *The End of Faith*, I also picked up a Santa Barbara *Independent*. Here’s how one of the obituaries<sup>1</sup> began:

*On July 15<sup>th</sup>, after a noble three and a half-year struggle with cancer, Carole submitted to God’s plan and died peacefully at home with her husband...by her side.*

That’s when I realized where my quarrel with Sam Harris lies. In the time we have this morning, I’m going to explain that quarrel, beginning with a quick sketch of what Harris and his “new atheist” compatriots believe; how they think. I’m going to mention the contrast between them and “classical atheists” of yore. As we progress, you’ll hear why this new atheism rubs up against my Unitarian Universalist values in uncomfortable ways, even as it dovetails with our tradition nicely. And you’ll hear why I believe that we UU’s have an important role to play in the dialogue about, and among, atheists.

Let’s go back to that obituary. In dying, it said, “Carole submitted to God’s plan.” I can’t imagine enduring three and a half years of cancer, but I do imagine that Carole’s suffering was eased by her faith that God was somehow preparing the way for her death. I imagine that her family will always derive comfort and peace from believing that Carole is now in the company of a loving God.

Religion, after all, is not always a tool of oppression and violence; it is also a haven for people in mourning, a framework on which people weave the meaning of life, and of death. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I believe that everyone has the right to his or her religious truth. Whether or not I agree with their faith is immaterial. I concede the point to Harris that “private” beliefs are just one step away from being public. But not all religious beliefs are, in his words, “*intrinsically dangerous*,” although the new atheists are preoccupied with the few that are.

Among the flock of so-called “new atheists,” the biggest names are Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins. Their tone is strident, the chip on their shoulder large, their leash on tolerance short. They don’t believe in God, of course, and so rather than attacking God, they attack all those who believe in God,<sup>2</sup> and open denounce all religious beliefs. In his book, for example, Harris calls religion “the mere maintenance of dogma,”<sup>3</sup> while Hitchens<sup>4</sup> flatly states, “religion poisons everything.”

It’s no accident, I think, that both of these men, as well as Richard Dawkins, have seen their books fly off the shelves. Why are their books so popular? There are, I’m guessing, two overlapping audiences who have handed the new atheists a bully pulpit.

First, many Americans are “[legitimately angry about] the intolerance and chauvinism of the radical religious right in this country.”<sup>5</sup> We resent the injection of faith into politics, the role of Christianity as litmus test, the framing of government in religious terms. New atheists like Hitchens and Harris tap into our anger, and amplify it; their writing is saturated with loosely-bridled rage and with arrogance. (Tell me: doesn’t the title *God Is Not Great* seem openly antagonistic to you?)

“Many Americans today are scared of religion,” notes one reviewer,<sup>6</sup> and who could blame us for enjoying the drama created by its most vocal opponents? It’s not just religion at home that Americans fear, however, it’s also – here’s the second audience for these books – the religion that gave way to a post-9/11 world. Among the new atheists, Sam Harris is the least afraid to criticize Islam (you got a taste of that in our reading; later in his book, Harris states<sup>7</sup> that Islam is not compatible with a civil society).

But Harris isn’t attacking Islam, per se – he takes unflinching aim at *all* people of the book, claiming that they’re all “averse to development and change. Fixated on ancient scriptures, they ignore the accumulating insights that have transformed the world. Every other field redefines its positions in the light of fresh data. Only religion takes increasing pride in being backward.”<sup>8</sup>

You’re beginning to understand why journalist Chris Hedges calls men like Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens “secular fundamentalists.” (Hedges’ book, by the way, is called *I Don’t Believe in Atheists*.) He explains,<sup>9</sup> “They adopt many of the foundational belief systems of fundamentalists. For example, they believe that the human species is marching forward, that there is an advancement toward some kind of collective moral progress – that we are moving towards... a better, more perfected human society.”

Get rid of religion, the new atheists suggest (a bit naively, this minister thinks), and we’d all be better off.<sup>10</sup> “People would... continue to cultivate essentially the same values as before, including altruism, but they would do it without” the drive of their religious texts and commandments.<sup>11</sup> As one reviewer puts it,<sup>12</sup>

The new softcore atheists assume that, by dint of Darwinism, we can just drop God like Santa Claus without having to witness the complete collapse of Western culture – including our sense of what is rational and moral. At least the hardcore atheists understood that if we are truly sincere in our atheism, the whole web of meanings and values that have clustered around the idea of God in Western culture has to go down the drain along with its organizing center.

Therein lies the greatest contrast between new atheism and the “hardcore atheists” like Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre. “Atheism is a cruel and long-range affair,” said Sartre; he and his comrades viewed godlessness as a rugged path.<sup>13</sup> If God were really dead, these

grand-daddies of atheism said, the world might reveal itself to be “infinite nothingness,” in the words of Nietzsche. If there is no God, no “transcendent basis for” morality, where would our notions of “right” and “wrong” come from?<sup>14</sup>

I think you’ve picked up on my belief that the new atheism rubs up against Unitarian Universalist values the wrong way: its intolerance of tolerance, its black-and-white view of how morality is shaped, its naive supposition that it would be possible to excise religion from a species that has *never been without it*.

I see one more place where new atheism and our UU tradition clash: our epistemology – how we know what we know. The new atheists use a yardstick of science to measure “truth” – a belief can only be true if you can test it, retest it, prove it to be fact. While we UU’s we require more than a small dose of *reason* with our religion, we’ve also inherited the legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Trust thyself,” he preached, 170 years ago. Since that time, Unitarians (and then Unitarian Universalists) have regarded the individual as mediator of his/her own truth.

What each of us knows is a piece of the truth. What provides meaning and comfort to me is mine; what’s yours is yours. I don’t need to *prove* my private truths, even when I share them with others, any more than Carole and her family need to prove that God was waiting for her on the other side of death.

It’s occurred to me, actually, that because of the prize we place on *agency*, and on creative ways of shaping religious community, Unitarian Universalists have something to teach, something to say to the world. *Our* voices need to be part of the dialogue.

Just as we – people of faith who are both moderate and rational – allowed fundamental Christians to co-opt religious dialogue and give “religion” a bad name, we’re now granting the same privilege to the new atheists. I appreciate humanist thought, and reason, and the scientific process. I feel that it’s inappropriate and insensitive, to inject “God” into our civic life. Why should the loudest voices in the atheism camp be the most intolerant and abrasive ones?

Here’s another opening for our wisdom: The new atheists have forced a separation between “atheism” and “faith.” I think, in fact, that the truer division lies between “non-religious” and “religious.” The fact that some of you are atheist makes clear that to be religious is not to subscribe to dogma, nor to a belief in God. Says one theologian,<sup>15</sup> “many... ordinary folks in churches, mosques, and synagogues... have found ways to be religious without being either stupid or homicidal. We are...’thinking critically, living faithfully.’ Not enough of our nonreligious neighbors know enough about what we believe. We need to speak up.”

Here is what I believe – these words come from UU lay leader Laila Ibrahim:

It's a blessing each of us was born.

It matters what we do with our lives.

What each of us knows (about God) is a piece of the truth. We don't have to do it alone.

May we continue to think critically, live faithfully;

and may we continue to use our lives to continue seeking truth.

\* *Endnotes*

1. July 24, 2008, p. 12.

2. "Fighting Atheist," a book review by William C. Placher. In *Christian Century*, Sept. 18, 2007, pp. 40-42.

3. Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 22.

4. *God Is Not Great*.

5. Chris Hedges, quoted in "I don't believe in atheists," an interview with Charly Wilder. *Salon.com*, March 13, 2008.

6. Placher.

7. Harris, pp. 151-2. "Is Islam compatible with a civil society?... I believe that the answer to this question is no."

8. "A fear of the faithful who mean exactly what they say," a review by Daniel Blue. In *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Aug. 15, 2004. See [www.sfgate.com](http://www.sfgate.com).

9. "I don't believe in atheists" by Charly Wilder. *Salon.com*, March 13, 2008.

10. "The idea that people would have been nicer to one another if they had never got religion, as Hitchens, Dawkins, and Harris seem to think, is a strange position for an atheist to take. For if man [sic] is wicked enough to have invented religion for himself [sic] he [sic] is surely wicked enough to have found alternative ways of making mischief." In "Atheists with Attitude," a book review by Anthony Gottlieb. In *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2007.

11. "Amateur Atheists" by John F. Haught. In *Christian Century*, Feb. 26, 2008, pp. 22-29.

12. Haught.

13. Haught, paraphrased.

14. Haught: "...There exists somewhere, in some mode of being, a realm of rightness that does not owe its existence completely to human invention, Darwinian selection, or social construction...If God does not exist, then neither do absolute values, and one should not issue moral judgments as though they do."

15. Placher.