

What Do Atheists Worship?
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READING

“The Central Task”, by Mark Morrison-Reed:

“The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

SERMON

The ideas in this sermon began many years ago when two men came as Christian Evangelists to see what latest form the devil had taken in my church. After the service they asked me, “You call this a worship service, but what exactly do you worship?” Looking into their faces, I knew there was only one answer I could give them to keep them engaged; “God; obviously” I said. This was not obvious to them. No one had said the word ‘God’ or even spoken of Jesus in the service that morning. I pointed out that for us God is quite variously named. Sometimes we worship Love, Christians know that God is Love; but we also can worship Rest, as named in the song this morning “Du Bist De Ruh”, the lyrics by Friedrich Ruckert: “You are my rest, / my calm and peace.” Sadly, for many people worship means a boring ritual or it means a chance to wring guilt or money from parishioners. The preacher’s job description given in the book *Cold Mountain*, was to ‘furiously condemn sinners, and to tell Bible stories with entertaining zeal’. Instead, the word ‘worship’ literally means ‘shape what is of worth’ or ‘claim what is of greatest worth’. So we worship the name of Joy and Health, Justice and Peace. All are different names for what is most true and good and beautiful.

This particular sermon began recently when my wife asked a neighbor what church he attended. He obviously wanted to end that line of conversation and said “I am a non-believer”. But Amy, unknown to him is an atheist. So she responded “Oh, then you should really come to our church”. Then he was certain it was time to end the conversation. Her question to me later

was of how we should invite atheists to church. "What does an atheist want to worship?" I asked myself, and then began to wonder, "Is that any different from what we worship?"

What do atheists worship? At one level the answer for us is the same as for every religious question – "it depends". It depends on what you mean by 'atheist' it depends on what you mean by 'worship'. In researching this sermon I came across this opinion by Cliff Walker of "Positive Atheism" Magazine. He argues that religious worship is an act of showing devotion to a deity and then says:

"To use the word "worship" in any sense other than the religious sense is to abuse the meaning of the word and to diminish the religious sense of the word. To say that since I believe evolution is accurate, I therefore worship Charles Darwin is an example of the abuse I am describing. The same is true of the charge that I worship myself.

No. I don't worship anything. I do not worship myself; I do not worship humanity; I do not worship reason; I do not worship any "life force." And I do not worship any gods: such beings are the figments of people's imaginations.

I simply live my life and do the best I can to be a good person. I do this because it is the right thing to do, not out of any reward I might receive."

His words remind me of the Thomas Paine quote, "The World is my country, all men and women are my brothers and sisters, and to do good is my religion." What is striking to me is that the atheist insists that he worships nothing, and yet expresses the ultimate worth of doing good because it is the right thing to do. That is his worship.

I, on the other hand, have never questioned the power of congregational worship, knowing it can exist and be vibrant with, or without, a deity. I have been creating worship since I was a teenager. At a youth conference in the Rocky Mountains one afternoon I was asked if I wanted to help plan a worship service. At the time I thought "What the heck". But what struck me later was that I knew immediately what we were doing, how to choose a theme, how to weave the various elements into one meaningful whole, how to interweave music and ritual. I knew then worship was about exploring meaning together and holding up what is true. That service was about unity in community. I remember the young guitarist singing of love that night. I remember that we had a central bowl, from which each person was given a little water in a cup: it was a water communion. I remember that we walked out in a line and formed a tight spiral under the brilliant stars of the night sky. Worship is giving shape to what is of ultimate worth and power in our lives and connecting us to that. Worship is great when it makes the holy present, or makes the invisible visible. As part of that our goals here are to help us live life well, to explore the meaning of our existence, to weekly empower and guide our moral and ethical

lives, to get each person to think, to consider, to explore the meaning and purpose, the deep beauty of human existence. We do all this within a vaguely Protestant form of worship.

In seminary I took a class on "Corporate Worship" meaning not 'worship in a corporation', but 'corporate' meaning "shared by all in a community or congregation". In the first order of service I handed in, as a class assignment, I included words for "Lighting the Chalice". The Presbyterian teacher of the class could not understand why or how I was planning to set a cup of communion wine on fire. With a big smile I had to explain our symbol to him, that the chalice contained oil or wax, not wine. It was also in that class I began to think of worship in terms of five acts: gathering, centering, focusing, exploring and returning to the world.

Worship can, of course, be done by an individual or with others. I have long said that spirituality is individual; religion is an attempt to share and connect our spirituality with others. We serve each other with worship. Once I know that a young girl came to church with her mom and noticed a plaque on the wall listing those who had died in military service. Her mom was impressed at her daughter's solemn attitude. After they had sat down in the pew, the daughter reached over and touched her mom's arm and asked. "Mom, what service did they die in; nine-o'clock or eleven-o'clock?" We offer this service to each other, we are strengthened by seeking worshipping together. You may know that for many years, when I was younger, I dabbled with Taoist and Buddhist thought and the practice of meditation, but it was never central to my life. Then, about 1998, I was asked by a member of my church to help start a Buddhist meditation group. I was surprised at how sitting in meditation with others helped my own practice: it became clearer, deeper, and more serious. I noticed how being together silently acknowledging our shared discipline and journey was worshipful.

In Donna Massini's poem, "The Sky Could Send You", the poet evokes this sense. Many times I have stood with a group of people under a night sky, listening to descriptions of what we could see. To this poet the vast skies seem a jumble, meaningless, one could connect any stars to make anything, to make it familiar; but in reality the stars are "patternless as measles". But somewhere in that gathering she sees something of faith, "that the names name". Other people remind her of trust and of meaning making. So our atheist comes to see the possibility of connections of all things, in community. And in those connections is the numinous.

The nominally Lutheran philosopher Rudolph Otto described the holy not in objective terms, not 'What is God', but in terms of human experience "What do we experience as Holy?" He used the word "numinous", a word that I love because it evokes overwhelming wonder and awe and even joy at a fearful power. I also like the word because it sounds like "luminous". Otto described the holy also with the Latin phrase "mysterium tremendum et fascinans", a fearfully and fascinating mystery. So a summer rainstorm, or the vast whirling beauty of the stars, or the face of a newborn, can be just as numinous as any vision of a personal deity. Still

these experiences happen. I remember once at a national assembly of Unitarian Universalists the poet Mary Oliver, silver haired by age, reading to us her latest work. There were three thousand people listening for two hours in rapt silence to one old woman reading poems. I remembered that night when I came across this poem of hers, titled "Yellow": "There is the heaven we enter / through institutional grace / and there are the yellow finches bathing and singing / in the lowly puddle." There should be something of the holy in our institutional grace and, if we are fortunate, we may even glimpse the numinous in our services feel its presence flowing through and connecting all our individual lives.

Now not everyone has the same facility for experiencing the numinous. Once I was with a group of Unitarian Universalists when the question was asked, "What is the most important of the Association's sources to you?" I immediately said, "Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder." But then an older man in the group, who had been listening to me intently said, "I don't know *what on earth* you are talking about. I have never had an experience of anything like that in my life." I was surprised, amazed that what was so central to my spiritual and religious life was non-existent in his. Certainly there were things that awakened awe in him, the vastness of geologic time, the clarity of certain mathematical equations, the wonder of life, but no mystery he felt was "transcending" in any supernatural sense. He respected my naturalistic mysticism, accepted that he and I were different and that we were both in the same congregation, sharing the same values and hope for humanity. Ultimately we worshipped the same thing: that which helped us to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly through life.

I want to emphasize that the point of worship is not isolated from our living. Meditation is largely useless if it does not change one's daily consciousness. Thus our congregational worship always leads out into how we live our days and confront evil in the world. One of my colleagues in Tulsa points out how many people are attending emotional Pentecostal style worship services that fill people with an overwhelming sense of the holy, and yet then they link that experience of the numinous with a conservative agenda, with 'narrow thought and lifeless creed', with hatred of lesbian or gay people, with fear of others, with lack of understanding of science and reason and their power to serve human goodness.

We come each week to not only be reminded of the holy but of its role in our lives. Whether we know the holy as a personal deity, or simply as Love embodied, we worship together. We come not only to be reminded of Joy and Peace and Hope and Transcending Wonder we remind each other to become truly Loving, Just, Compassionate, Hopeful and Good. Let us worship together, each week in community, and beyond in our daily lives: atheists and others alike.