

Good Without God?
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Durango
Presented by Ron Garst
Feb. 5, 2012

Can we be good without God? Can we be good by ourselves, without the help of God? Let us start this discussion with several quotes on the idea of being good with or without God.

Indeed no man can be good without the help of God. Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca, first century CE

If your time on earth were all there is to your life, I would suggest you start living it up immediately. You could forget about being good and ethical, and you wouldn't have to worry about any consequences of your actions. You could indulge yourself in total self-centeredness because your actions would have no long-term repercussions. Pastor Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Drive Life*. (I think he should talk to Tiger Woods about consequences.)

We are moral beings in God's image. Without this fundamental understanding of man's place in the world, we risk being lured into misguided pursuits, including bestiality, slavery and membership in PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Ann Coulter, conservative pundit.

And now, let us move from the ridiculous to the sublime with two quotes from a famous American scientist.

I do not believe in immortality of the individual, and I consider ethics to be an exclusively human concern with no superhuman authority behind it. Albert Einstein

If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed. Albert Einstein

Overview

The issue we address today is not about whether one can be good without God, because people do it every day. Rather, we wish to explore what people say about being good without God.

For non-believers this is not a hypothetical question. Polls indicate that a majority of Americans have a negative opinion of atheists, agnostics and nonbelievers. Prejudice against nonbelievers is similar to prejudices based on skin color, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, political views, education, or geographic origins.

As we all know, it is not easy to be an ethical person—with or without god. Ethics, as defined by a wag, is what you do when no one is looking.

Today's discussion will examine three perspectives on Good without God. First, we will discuss Humanism and second, the so-called Nones (N-O-N-E-S) or those who have no religious preference. Finally, we will look at why atheists might form organizations based on their non-belief—sounds like an oxymoron doesn't it?

Humanism

A couple of years ago, from this podium, I spoke about Humanism and asked the question, "Are you a Humanist?" After the service, several members approached me and said indeed they considered themselves as Humanists.

Some have said that the largest concentrations of church-going Humanists are found in Unitarian Universalist fellowships or churches. The UUA website states: "Humanism (is) among the largest spiritual identity groups within Unitarian Universalism."

The following are Humanist values as stated on the UUA website. As I go through them, think about how they relate to our UU principles.

1. Showing love to all humans is a worthy goal.
2. Immortality is found in the examples we set and the work we do.
3. We gain insight from many sources and all cultures, and there are many religious books and teachings that can instruct us about how to live.
4. We have the power within ourselves to realize the best we are capable of as human beings.
5. We are responsible for what we do and become; our lives are in our own hands.

Most Humanists reject dependence on "faith," defined as a belief in God or in doctrines based on revelation rather than proof. Humanist philosophy does not include the supernatural, divine texts, resurrection, reincarnation, revelation, or any other belief for which we have no proof.

Belief in God means believing in something on faith—as opposed to the proof demanded by a hard-nosed scientist. This may explain why a Pew Charitable Trust poll found a mere 7 percent of the members of the National Academy of Science professing a belief in a deity. Instead, they have faith in humanity. While we have a great deal of data on the good works of humanity, sadly, we also have abundant proof of inhumanity.

One's worldview is not as simple as deciding that "I believe" or "I'm an atheist." Especially now that "God" can mean anything you want it to mean. Believer and atheist have become such broad categories that the only thing they really communicate is the kind of polarizing, talking-point divisiveness of which bad partisan political debates are made.

If, for example, one defines God as love, then I can agree with that. If one defines God as a supernatural being who watches over us and answers our prayers, then I am a non-believer. It all depends on definitions.

If the universe started with the big bang some 14 billion years ago, for which there is sound scientific evidence, then what was there before the big bang and what caused the big bang? This uncertainty leads many who deny the existence of a personal God to hold out the possibility that some force is behind the existence of the universe. So the question "Do you believe in God?" is a false choice as it has only two options, yes or no. Instead the question people ought to be asking is "What do you believe **about** God?"

Here is a rough continuum of views on God. It may help you better define your own views.

1. Is yours a personal God who looks after you and answers your prayers?
2. Did God start the universe and then back away? (Deist view)
3. Are you a soft agnostic who is not sure about whether God exists?
4. Are you a strong agnostic who believes it is impossible to know about God?
5. Are you an atheist who is convinced there is no God?

Many religious conservatives believe that religion-based rules, regulations and guidelines are necessary to prevent society from slipping into a moral chaos that would lead to anarchy.

Humanists maintain, in contrast to a conservative religious view, that laws and ethical principles must come from human reason and compassion. In addition, I would argue that some moral principles are so ingrained that reason is not required—for example, "Thou shalt not commit murder".

Religion gets a vote, but not a veto in the construction of a moral code. If religious precepts can help lead to a good life and society, those ideas may be adopted. Humanists have no special allegiance to laws of a different time that were meant to deal with different problems. Slavery, formerly common, has been outlawed for decades. Unfortunately, we are still dealing with slavery, as some people have not caught up with the times.

Some people believe that religious teachings hold for all times. Imagine this scenario. You assume that your beliefs are the same as, say, your great-great-great-grandmother. In this imaginary scene (where all of you are present despite the time difference), a member of your family suddenly has a heart attack and you have someone call an ambulance while you start CPR. Your multi-great-grandmother stares at you in disbelief that you did not first pray to God to banish the demons inside him. In addition, she would be disgusted by your support of gay marriage, and take personal offense at your willingness to vote for a political candidate of a different race. So much for timeless values.

We all know there is a right and wrong, and we know we cannot exist alone, so we soon understand that some moral concepts are universal. Let me tell you about a moral dilemma experiment developed by some psychologists.

Imagine that you are a railroad yard control tower operator who, with the flick of a switch can divert railcars to different tracks. The yard is large, busy and noisy. On one track is a lone worker and on another there are five people working. Suddenly you see a runaway boxcar headed toward the five workers. You have about two seconds to make a decision and flip a switch or not. If you do nothing the five workers surely will be killed and if you act you can divert the boxcar to the other track and kill the lone worker. (Morton's fork)

What decision would you make? Overwhelmingly, and in many different cultural settings, people chose to divert the boxcar to save the five workers. This suggests that there are at least some universal values.

Finally, if you are a Humanist, you will be in the company of people such as John Lennon, Winston Churchill, Margaret Sanger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Salman Rushdie, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mark Twain, Margaret Meade, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Albert Einstein, Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, E.O. Wilson and Charles Darwin.

The Nones

Now, let us turn to "The Nones," those who profess attachment to no organized religion. Nones are a growing portion of the world population; in fact there are about a billion of them—but not all are non-believers. Many spiritual people are not attached to a religious institution.

Before I get into the results of a survey conducted in 2008, let me give you a bit of technical background.

These data come from a poll by the American Religious Identification Survey of Trinity College, Hartford, Conn. The national sample included 54,461 adults, of which 7,047 were Nones. The margin of error is +/- 0.3% for the full sample and for the None subsample, +/-2.4%. In this political season it is good to remember that

most polling error is in the range of +/- 3.5% to +/-5.0%. All percentages refer to adults only—children are not included.

Overall, Nones are about 14% of the US population, which is roughly the same as the world percentage. But in the US, 22% of 18-29 year olds are Nones. About 19% of US men are Nones but only 12% of women are Nones. There are 60 males for every 40 females.

The 1990s were a “secular boom”; each year Nones saw a gain of 1.3 million more American adults about half our population growth. Since 2001, the number has dropped to about 660,000 per year or roughly ¼ of the growth.

In 2008, Nones exceeded the combined total of all non-Christian religious groups in the US.

Most Nones are “new” Nones—only 32% were Nones at age 12 and 35% of “new” Nones are former Catholics (24% of the US population).

Latinos have tripled their proportion among Nones from 1990-2008 from 4% to 12%.

Overall, Nones are reflective of the total population and are not significantly different in terms of education, income, divorce rates, and race.

However, the national distribution of Nones is not uniform. For example, Nones are 34% of the population in Vermont but only 5 % in Mississippi. Nones are 21 % of the Colorado population.

Politically, Nones tended to be more Independent: in 2008, 21% of independents were Nones, as were 16% of Democrats and 8% of Republicans.

Breakdown of Nones regarding the existence of God:

		Nones	US Pop.	Ratio
Atheist	There is no such thing	7%	2%	3.5
Hard agnostic	Impossible to know	19	4	5
Soft agnostic	I’m not sure	16	6	3
Deist	Higher power, no personal god	24	12	2
Theist	Personal god	27	70	0.4
Don’t know/refused		7	6	

What do all these numbers mean? Basically, a large number of Americans do not profess a religion. Nones absolute numbers are growing but the percentage of Nones seems to be declining. This survey does not probe the reasons for this change.

Now, since I have no data, let me speculate a bit. If a UU drops out I suspect that he or she is more likely to become a None or practice an eastern religion rather than join a more conservative church.

Also, might we seek to attract Nones to our fellowship?

Atheist Associations

Let us turn briefly to the atheists. Why are there associations of atheists and agnostics? The main reason for them, at least in the United States, is the battle over the separation of church and state, the fight against teaching creationism in our schools and for continuing to teach evolution, and for rights of all sorts of groups—women’s rights, gay rights, abortion rights, and so on.

Many people incorrectly confuse atheism with a hatred of god, with Satanism, hedonism, anarchism, nihilism and other forms of distasteful “isms.” It is none of these; instead atheism is the absence of belief in a deity.

So what do atheists stand for? The following definition of atheism was given to the Supreme Court of the United States in the case of *Murray v. Curlett*, 1963, Madeline Murray sued to remove reverential Bible reading and unison recitation of the Lord's Prayer in the public schools (remember the 1963 date). Again, think about UU principles.

- An atheist loves his fellow man instead of god, believes that heaven is something for which we should work now – here on earth for all men together to enjoy.
- An atheist believes that he can get no help through prayer but that he must find in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it, and enjoy it.
- Only through knowledge of himself and of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will lead to a life of fulfillment.
- He seeks to know himself and his fellow man rather than to know a god. An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church, that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said. We should strive for involvement in life and not escape into death. We want disease conquered, poverty vanquished, war eliminated. He wants man to understand and love man.
- He wants an ethical way of life. He believes that we cannot rely on a god or channel action into prayer nor hope for an end of troubles in a hereafter.

- He believes that we are our brother's keepers and are keepers of our own lives; that we are responsible persons and the job is here and the time is now.

In simple terms, atheists believe that everything is up to us since we cannot rely on a deity.

In recent years we have heard an increasing number of statements that the US is a Christian nation—this despite what the constitution says. So, let us consider some quotes of some of our founders.

Benjamin Franklin: Some books against Deism fell into my hands... It happened that they wrought an effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them; for the arguments of the Deists, which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations, in short, I soon became a thorough Deist.

Ethan Allen: I have generally been denominated a Deist, the reality of which I have never disputed, being conscious that I am no Christian.

John Adams: The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope you will consider that it is indeed possible for non-believers to lead moral and ethical lives based on standards of conduct not handed down from on high, but based on human consciousness and compassion tested by experience. As shown by cross-cultural studies of moral dilemmas, our innate humanness knows no cultural divide.

Then we considered the “Nones”, a significant portion of the US and global population. As one would expect, the Nones are more on the non-believer end of the religious spectrum, but Nones are almost indistinguishable from the rest of the population in terms of social indicators.

Finally, atheist organizations are fighting for many of the same causes as UUs, such as separation of church and state, teaching of evolution as opposed to creationism, human rights and other causes we espouse. And their principles overlap somewhat with UU principles.

I hope I have given you some food for thought.