

Is there an “Orthodox Atheism”?

The Quaker preacher and abolitionist Lucretia Mott followed a guiding principle throughout her life advocating for freedom and freethought: “Truth for authority, not authority for truth.” People in Lucretia’s time and many today still get distracted by philosophical and religious debates over the meaning of truth. What we don’t have much problem with is identifying authority. An individual or group that claims to be an authority or the primary authority in some area must be open to question and additional knowledge, since truth is living, and like a forest, must continue to add new growth.

Being a practicing freethinker I can’t help but challenge orthodoxy and self-assumed authority when it comes to either faith or atheism.

Now and then people on “both sides of the aisle” (it’s not always a huge gulf between) react to my cooperative, collaborative approach to the Theism/Atheism divide. I can tell thirty years of stories proving there is common ground where believers and non-believers meet, talk, walk, work with and even befriend and love each other. Decades of evidence, stories from chaplaincy showing that people can get along, if they actually try (realizing that many in the non-faith world don’t “get it” any more than the faithers).

Of course, if one chooses not to care, not to even attempt to rationally communicate, I can’t speak to that. It just seems petty and pointless.

I’m not trying to make any atheists mad here (from the sound of it, many are already pretty mad), but when I hear the raging rhetoric of many of the anti-faithers I feel compelled to ask: *Does it preach?* You remember, don’t you? When some of us were in ministry we’d come up with some wild notion or heretical thought and a colleague would say, “Yeah, that’s nice, but will it preach?”

So, I ask fellow non-supernaturalists, will the irascible attacks and mean-spirited memes “preach” to anyone but those caught in the echo chamber or the bubble of unbelief? Seriously, who are people talking to, if anyone other than the online “atheist crowd”? Who’s even hearing MY voice right now? A select group of Patheists (Patheos readers)?

In my view, few religious people are listening. Why should they? Those who listen at all either take the “bait to debate” or assume all atheists are SOB’s. So, I ask again, what’s the point?

When I left my ordination I stated to my congregated clergy colleagues (mostly shocked or yawning) that *the Church was exhibiting a kind of mental illness, speaking only with itself. Is this true for many non-believers as well?* If so, intervention is called for, don't you think?

When I first walked out, I was disheartened and discouraged because I felt dissed. Why wasn't my radical kind of chaplaincy (read: Jesus' kind of work) supported by more churches and ministers? It was supported, but I thought the whole damn (damned!) Church should be writing big checks and joining me "out there in the real suffering world—with Jesus, by the way." With time and lots of hiking, I got over that profound pissed-off-ness. I stayed in relationship with a number of those inside the faith who stayed with me even as an outsider. Valuable friends. Reasonable believers? You betcha.

We all know the Christmas carol, "Do You Hear What I Hear?" Do others in the secular world hear what I hear? You can "believe" that this is what believers are hearing:

What I hear: "Religious people are mindless sheep and faith is stupid."

What I hear: "Real atheists have to belittle believers, telling them how ignorant and delusional they are."

What I hear: "ALL Christians are. . ."; "ALL Muslims are. . ."; "ALL people in churches believe. . ." (reflecting an attitude that is essentially the *definition of bigotry*).

What I hear: "Religion has absolutely nothing positive to offer the world."

What I hear: "You can't have close, respectful relationships with believers and be a 'good' atheist."

Much of this seems to imply that Atheism—intractable Atheism—is "the answer," i.e., the New Orthodoxy. "We're smart; they're stupid." Now there's a message that will preach or teach or reach anyone. . .Not.

If this is what non-believing preachers are preaching, all they can come up with for their secular sermons, *I'll proudly be a double heretic—among the faithful and the faithless.*

Many of the memes, cartoons and atheist graffiti posted around the walls of the internet show a lack of broad knowledge of the history or daily reality of religion. And frankly, many reveal a lack of experience with a variety of religious practitioners. I find that level of ignorance inexcusable—given Google; given the mosque, synagogue or zendo down the street. There seems to be an almost adolescent need to ridicule and disrespect, which I fully understand if a person takes no thought for others beyond “winning the game” against some stereotypical scarecrow of the world of spirituality.

If we hear a non-theist say, “In my experience” or “as far as I know,” “it seems to me” or “people of faith I talk to,” when presenting a question or critique, that’s honest and worthy of consideration. Simply “bashing” and “blasting” some imagined boogeyman of faith just sounds like another “reality show” or FAUX News “discussion.”

There are atheists that I seriously doubt are freethinkers.

I hear people say, “THEY do it! Christians do it! They’re attacking us, it’s a war and we’re gonna fight back!” Well, have at it, but don’t count me in. I don’t hang with nasty people on either side of that border wall. Let’s be serious: *using Godlessness as a weapon is no better or worse than using God as a weapon.*

The “War on Christians” or “War on Religion” is about as nonsensical and pointless as the “War on Christmas.” Tell me: who wins, and how does winning look to you, feel for you? In my view, a portion of what I hear borders on hate speech.

On the other end of the spectrum I’m increasingly hearing news reports that use more balanced language, such as events or actions with “interfaith and *community groups*.” We should be encouraging this, and offering more inclusive language, than playing into the hand of the “faithphobes” and other polarizers.

Some in atheist circles don’t seem to like these progressive steps toward mutual respect. One accused me of being—horror of horrors—“pastoral.” I took that as a compliment. Another questioned whether I really am an atheist since I have “warm relationships” with believers. This made me think of some religious folks who think I never was a believer, never “gave my heart to Jesus.” Can’t really argue with any of these people. They’re all non-believers, I guess.

When I think of it, I would much rather stand on a stage or in a classroom or even a sanctuary beside people of faith than a whole lot of the “psychic cyclones” stirring up hate in anti-faith circles.

Here’s something I’ve been preparing to say: for those of us who were once in the ministry, any ministry, I have to wonder what, if anything, has been “carried over.” Is there nothing to bring with us after years of human service (or at least Sunday School)? Have we carried over the “best” of what our faith traditions taught, you know, things like lovingkindness, compassion, a sense of love for others? If we’ve thrown out the proverbial baby with the bathwater and that baby was not just JC but the love of one’s neighbor and the “golden rule,” then I have to ask, For Goodness’ Sake, Why?

It’s great to be “good without a god,” but let’s not forget the good because we’re so agitated about gods.

Those of us who have left the traditions of old need to present new ideas, fresh alternatives to faith. Simply arguing incessantly in an agitated defense of some imagined atheist orthodoxy is no viable alternative. Who really believes—and I think it does approach its own belief-system—that “Religion is dying, doomed and should be destroyed”? Maybe you think that (believe that) but is that you’re “gospel”—is this the best “good news” you can offer?

Let’s offer something better, that works for all moderately reasonable people on both sides of the equation. First, there are no “sides.” There are some humans who have religious faith and some who don’t. Second, how can we talk to each other? Third, what do you have that I could learn from, and what could you learn from me? Fourth, how can we work together to question and confront those who want to beat their Theism or their Atheism into swords? Fifth, since Orthodoxy means thinking my opinions are superior to yours, what can we do to move beyond the superiority complex?

I’m far from naive. I let go of pie-in-the-sky thinking a long time ago. But somehow I’m still hopeful—I still like pie! Perhaps that’s due in part to many years of baking without recipes—trying new ways of making things that might appeal to a variety of tastes (not trying to please everyone). This is an image of Heterodox belief and practice—going a different way, trying something that might actually be better, choosing the happier heretic way. There are literally “other opinions,” “other paths to walk.” Many who

believe and disbelieve will not walk with us. But I don't think our walking (or baking) will be wasted.

I'm with the petite Quaker preacher. Let's be freethinkers who side with truth as our authority, practicing a wisely humble heresy, wary of our own tendency to orthodoxy.

Chris Highland
2019

(originally published on Patheos)