

# “Why Atheists Come To Church”

A Sermon delivered by Reverend Marlin Lavanhar  
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, Sunday, January 25, 2009

So why *do* atheists come to church? A Methodist colleague who I bumped into this week said, “They come because you put that sermon title on your sign.”

Is there anyone here visiting for the first time because of the sermon title? (And is willing to admit it?) Another person said, “Atheists who are single come to church to find a mate,” which I guess is better than finding one in a bar. At least, we hope it’s better! So let me help those folks: Raise your hand if you are looking for a mate. Apparently some come to the church seeking God and others come seeking the flesh. **(note: no one raised their hand in either service)**

Truthfully, there are a lot of reasons why someone who disbelieves or doubts the existence of God would come to church. All Souls has always been a place that has included atheists, agnostics and humanists, naturalists and rationalists, secular Jews, cultural Catholics and practicing Buddhists. We have always had our share of doubters, dissenters and debaters, scholars and skeptics, scientists and secularists. So it is important that we speak about this, when we speak about inclusion, so we can remind one another what it means to be a part of a free church.

I will start with the practical before I turn to the theological. There are a whole group of people who start coming to All Souls not for themselves, but for their children. They want their children to have a learning community in which to explore the important questions of life and meaning, morals and death. They want their children to grow up with an understanding of religious matters, stories of the Bible, and the religions of the world. But they also want their children to gain this understanding in a place where their heads will not be filled with guilt, fear, shame, judgment and exclusionary thinking. In a place that does not deny or discount scientific truths or stifle a child’s innate curiosity and questions.

Here at All Souls, the focus of our religious education is to help spark our children’s curiosity about important matters of faith and life. We try to give children knowledge of the big questions and show them how people throughout time and across cultures have answered these questions. We try to provide them with basic decision-making skills so children can know how to answer moral questions for themselves as they grow older and face an ever-changing world. In other words, here, religious education is not about indoctrination or recitation. It is about nurturing a sense of awe about our existence, and opening children’s worlds to the beauty of life, with the stories of scripture, the songs of the spirit, as well as the teachings of science.

Many parents come first for their children, but end up staying for themselves. They never knew there was a religion so inclusive and so free. They never knew there was a church where they did not have to feel like a hypocrite, where they could bring their doubts, their questions and their true beliefs unhindered and unashamed. Some of the things that keep atheists here are the same things that keep most people here:

- the freedom to be honest about what we believe
- the opportunity to learn from others who are different from ourselves
- the opportunity to be a part of programs dedicated to racial justice, social action and public education that make a real impact

But there's also the reality that:

- We all have questions of meaning and substance that we wrestle with.
- We all encounter loss, betrayal and the need for forgiveness sometimes.
- We all long for community, and for beauty, tradition and celebration in our lives.

So the atheists who come here do not ask, "Will I agree with everything that is said, that is sung, that is talked about?" Because they know they won't. Instead they ask, "Is there room for my perspective, for my truth, for my questions, in the tapestry of meaning and value that is found and that is present in this church?" And the answer is a wholehearted "Yes!"

But there are theological issues to consider. In the book of Genesis, we are told that God tells Adam and Eve they can eat and partake of all the fruits of all the trees and seed-bearing plants in the garden, except for one – because the fruits of that one tree will lead to death. In the Bible that forbidden tree is called the tree of knowledge of good and evil. At All Souls the one tree that is forbidden is the tree of exclusion. In other words, if someone starts to think they know for certain who is *good* and who is *evil*, or who is *in* and who is *out*, we are all in trouble. We can eat from all the trees of knowledge and tradition and religion and spirituality and philosophy and science, but NOT from the tree which – once we eat from it – we start becoming self-righteous and believing all the other trees are wrong and inferior. Because eating of the fruits of the tree of exclusion leads to death – death in the sense that exclusive beliefs cut us off from other people, other ideas and other truths.

Exclusive beliefs sometimes lead to actual death and real destruction. Some of the fruits of exclusive religion have names like terrorism, the Crusades, the pogroms, the Inquisition, witch hunts, censorship, theocracy, manifest destiny. These are the noxious fruits of religious exclusion that have, and continue to, lead to death. These are the fruits that drip not sweet nectar, but blood.

Sometimes exclusive truth claims cut people off from family and friends who may claim they are going to hell. They have eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and think they have such knowledge. These kinds of beliefs often lead to the death of relationships, and the hardening of the heart.

But here's the catch for the atheists – who often think they are above all of this. They can become exclusive too. It is proof of the expression: "Choose your enemies wisely because you may become like them." Many atheists, who abhor fundamentalism, have come to look like a mirror image of the hard-headed, short-sighted fundamentalists they reject. They have become just as self-righteous and superior in their own minds.

Over the past few years there have been a number of best-selling books by atheist authors like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. These books contain some wonderful thinking, and offer some valuable and much-needed critiques. But these authors often go too far, by making exclusive claims of their own, that demean and denigrate and diminish other people's faith and worldviews. In doing so, they are sowing their own seeds of division, and serving to close people's minds toward the beauty and the power and the value of religion and ritual and scripture. They are also giving atheists a bad name. Atheists already have a hard enough time in this culture as it is. Can you imagine an atheist in this country running for president? Or becoming a Supreme Court justice?

Being atheist does not have to mean being anti-religious. When people ask me how we have atheists in our church, I tell them that in our church we are much more concerned about idolatry than we are about atheism. That usually gets me an interesting look, and people's ears perk up. I explain that idolatry, of course, is when someone worships something that is less than God or less than the ultimate good. Whenever someone devotes their life and best efforts to something smaller than what is of ultimate value, they are committing idolatry. You know people for whom money, power, prestige, fame and fortune have become the driving force and the highest good that they know. At this church we offer better alternatives for what makes life valuable and meaningful.

But there is an even more dangerous form of idolatry that we have to watch out for. So many religions and religious people worship a god that is too small to be the ultimate good or ultimate God. Too many people worship a god they believe tells them that only their religion is right and good and other people's religion is wrong and bad. I'm here to tell you, that god is too small! And anyone praying to such a god and sacrificing for such a god is committing idolatry. Too many people worship a god who teaches misogyny, male superiority, homophobia, and

religious exclusiveness. That is not the almighty or ultimate God; that god is too small. That is idolatry and it is dangerous. Such beliefs too often lead to division, superiority and prejudice, war and terrorism. They break up families who could be and should be loving one another. They oppress women and others, and they demean faiths and cultures different from their own.

There is a reason that the first of the Ten Commandments is a prohibition against idolatry. Idolatry is dangerous and even deadly. That is why we need to be much more concerned about idolatry than atheism. Most atheists I know are kind-hearted, thoughtful people – upstanding citizens – who live with moral purpose and high ethical standards. Those atheists who consider themselves humanists are following a tradition of thought that flows from the ancient Greek philosophers through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and continues today among some of the best and brightest. These ancient philosophical traditions have much to offer any community, as long as their purveyors do not fall into the fallacy of exclusivism. We should be much more concerned about religious people who devote their lives to a narrow and exclusive god, than we should be concerned about people who doubt the existence of God.

As for me, I like to think of myself as a connoisseur of fine fruit. I like to partake from the fruits of all the trees in the garden – except of course from the one that labels all the others wrong. Let me describe some fantastic delicacies I've found in the garden of faith. Each one has shed some light on the spiritual path for me.

First of all, atheists and humanists have taught me to be careful of superstition in religion and to avoid magical thinking. And to watch out for the idolatries of the spirit that dress up in the garb of religion while promoting ideas of a god who is way too narrow. Also, atheists and humanists tend to have a strong sense of responsibility for the common good. Because atheists and humanists do not believe there is a God that will come down and save the world or answer our prayers. Therefore, they take to heart that it is up to us to do the work of feeding the hungry and housing the homeless.

From theists of all kinds, I have learned the joy of celebrating with gratitude and humility, the mystery and awe at the center of our existence. I have learned to cherish a sense of God that exists within in each of us, yet is greater than all of us.

From Buddhists I have learned to pay attention to the moment, and that it is possible and purposeful to sit with pain and suffering. Most importantly Buddhism has taught me techniques of meditation that make both living in the moment and sitting with suffering possible.

Hindus have presented to me how the body can be a vehicle for wisdom. And I think they understand better than anyone how religion needs to be holistic – encompassing our mind, body and spirit – and not just a cerebral undertaking.

Muslims have shown me that religion can be a part of every moment of life. That it is not just one day a week, and it is not just for priests and monks and nuns, but it is the work of all people all the time. Also, they have given us the spectacular Sufi poets like Rumi and Hafiz.

The Jews have shown me how to bring religion into the home with friends and family through songs and rituals and candles as part of weekly meals. They have also provided some of the most powerful poetry, prayers, prophets and proverbs. Exodus and Ester, Jonah, Job and Jeremiah, the Song of Solomon and the Psalms of David. Most importantly, Jews have shared the conviction that religion must be on the side of justice.

From Christianity I have gotten Jesus – the primary model for my ministry. His fearless love and radical inclusion are the center of my life. From Christianity we have also taken the liturgical year that includes Christmas, Easter, Good Friday, and Ash Wednesday. These rituals are like dress rehearsals that we enact in church on a yearly cycle, preparing us for the births, betrayals, losses, deaths and desperations, as well as the resurrections of the spirit that come in our own lives. This annual cycle of holidays and holy days tills the soil and prepares the ground for the defining moments of our lives. They do so by offering us shared stories and wisdom, by helping us build character, and by reminding us what is truly important. These celebrations connect us to the past and give us a way to pass something on to the next generation that is much more than just our own creation.

After having tasted the fruits of so many of these sacred trees, I cannot imagine going back to eating from only one. My faith has become a garden to be tended carefully and enjoyed abundantly.

At times I do feel a tinge of sadness when I imagine that atheists are missing out on a dimension of the human experience that brings my life such joy and meaning. It is similar to how I feel about people who do not appreciate classical music. Such music is another thing that brings my life so much joy, meaning, beauty and depth. And just like I try to introduce people to different forms of music that they may not yet appreciate, I'll continue to try to introduce you to concepts of faith and theology, ritual and religion, which may someday take root in the clay of your heart, and in the garden of your faith.

Here at All Souls, however, we stand as a testimony that people do not all have to eat from the same religious fruits, nor do they all have to appreciate the same music. What's important

here is for us to weed out all ideas of superiority and exclusiveness because these are nothing less than a way of worshipping the wrong god. When we eat from that tree, we will surely die.

Before us has been placed life and death. Choose life. And let your light shine.

Amen.