



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

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Humanism & Humility

A Sermon by Reverend Nathan C. Walker

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'Tis the Season

'Tis the season to profess one's beliefs. Some do so by decorating massive Christmas trees in public buildings; others counter-mobilize by placing Menorahs and Kwanza candles next to the white baby Jesus. Others protest these public displays of religiosity by blogging profanities or withdrawing from society to brew in silence.

'Tis the season to profess one's beliefs. Some do as families gather at the holiday table to convince one another of their truths. We all know that Aunt Christiana who smiles while aggressively giving the gift of eternal salvation. We all know that Uncle Anton who practically spits while proclaiming his atheism. 'Tis' the season to use our faith, to use our reason, to annihilate those whose worldviews differ from our own. Happy holidays.

Cyclical Absolutism

There is a cyclical nature to such absolutism, which leads me to articulate the thesis of this talk: *rationalism feeds fundamentalism; fundamentalism feeds atheism.*

You might ask, how can rationalism feed something so irrational? Well, reason can take precedence over other ways of cultivating knowledge when the sole criterion of truth is deduced scientifically. When applied to the discipline of theology, modern rationalists seek to prove the existence of, not only, God but to prove the existence of religious prophets. Lifetimes are spent trying to scientifically prove what prophets did or did not say, and most importantly what they *really* believed.

This results in two unfortunate consequences. On one hand, this defensive errand of rationalism breeds religious literalism, where ancient scriptures are deemed as "fact" and therefore *infallible*. On the other hand, this scientific approach to theology strips all mystery and awe from stories that were intended to be *mythos*: legends written as poetic metaphor to reveal a transcendent sense of wonder. In modern times, our understanding of rationalism makes it difficult to return to such a state of wonder because fundamentalists seem to get all the attention.

In response, modern people either, one, reason themselves out of having any faith at all; or two, if they do claim a faith are embarrassed and ashamed to express doubt in fear of not being seen as *reasonable*; or three, they adopt a hyper-rationalist approach by treating scripture as historical evidence for their dogma. In this way, rationalism feeds fundamentalism.

Karen Armstrong, an esteemed scholar of comparative religions, reminds us that "fundamentalism is a defiantly unorthodox form of faith."¹ For example, Greek philosophers

“used the word *dogma* to describe a truth that could not be put readily into words, could be understood only after long immersion in ritual, and, as the understanding of the community deepened, changed from one generation to another. Today in the West *dogma* is defined as *a body of opinion formulated and authoritatively stated*, while a *dogmatic* person is one who *asserts opinions in an arrogant and authoritative manner*. We no longer understand Greek *theoria* as the activity of *contemplation* but as a *theory*, an idea in our heads that has to be proved.”²

Unfortunately, modern theologians treat theology as theory to be proved by articulating dogma as an authoritative statement of faith. As Armstrong notes, “This rationalized interpretation of religion has resulted in two distinctively modern phenomena: fundamentalism and atheism.”³

Fundamentalism is born when creedal statements or scriptural passages are professed as fact, which breeds a wholesale rejection of not only that specific creed but also a wholesale rejection of religion all together. Why? Because we find ourselves saying, *it doesn't make sense – it's unreasonable*. As a result, the fastest growing demographic in the United States are those who have rejected religion. This may be due to the trend of fundamentalists “scientifically proving” their beliefs in response to the modern expectation of rationalism. Religious rationalists seek to develop methods to prove “creation science” and to literally define “family values” based on the inerrancy of particular biblical passages. What was historically considered to be metaphorical contemplations have been co-opted by religious literalists, whose attempts to make myths “facts” feeds the wholesale rejection of the discipline of theology: fundamentalism feeds atheism.

Fundamentalism Feeds Atheism

And yet, Armstrong teaches us that historically “people were often called *atheists* when society was in transition from one religious perspective to another: Euripides and Protagoras were accused of *atheism* when they denied the Olympian gods in favor of a more transcendent theology; the first Christians and Muslims, who were moving away from traditional paganism, were persecuted as *atheists* by their contemporaries⁴... not because they denied the reality of God but because their conception of divinity was so different that it seemed blasphemous.”⁵ You see, historically, theologians in the three Abrahamic traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – “insisted for centuries that God does not exist...” so as “not to deny the reality of God but to safeguard God’s transcendence.”

In this way, modern atheism is a kind of salvation: it saves God from religious rationalism, from religious literalism. Atheism, at best, upholds *doubt* as a tool by which to make meaning; in this way *doubt* transcends the need to constantly apply scientific methods to intuitive disciplines, such as theology and philosophy. At worst, atheism upholds *disbelief with certainty* as a weapon by which to demean others; in this way, *disbelief with certainty* becomes an arrogant way to challenge believers to prove their faith: “proving faith” being an oxymoron. I think this offensive approach to disprove another’s beliefs can be just as inhumane as when religious fundamentalists try and use scientific deductions to “prove” their preconceived beliefs.

Socratic Rationalism

There is a way out of these prisons of righteousness: we can reclaim our common humanity by practicing humility. We do so by returning to the classical teachings of the founders

of Western rationalism – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – who “saw no opposition between reason and the transcendent.”⁶

“Participants in a Socratic dialogue discovered how little they knew... The shock of ignorance and confusion represented a conversion to the philosophic life, which could not begin unless you realized that you knew nothing at all.”⁷

One therefore came not to aggressively debate; one came not to prove, but to inquire. The purpose was to engage in disciplined acts of courtesy and gentleness, in order to rigorously reach the humbling *state of unknowing*. This resulted in not a sense of defeat or frustration or failure but a change of mind and heart.

‘Tis the Season

Imagine such a gift exchange this season: a willingness to lay down our certainties and to simply listen. Listen not with the mind to later use the other’s words to harm but to simply listen with the heart, aware that the act of being heard can heal.

This healing can occur whether one is an atheist or a theist, because it is humbling to recognize the limits of rationalism. For example, Karen Armstrong reminds us about why we return to this historic building week after week, “Scientific rationality can tell us why we have cancer; it can even cure us of our disease. But it cannot assuage the terror, disappointment, and sorrow that comes with the diagnosis, nor can it help us to die well.”⁸

In these vulnerable moments, we gather as a community, as a family, not to provide one another with scripted answers but to embrace all that which we do not know. It is in these moments all labels fall away as we come face to face with our common mortality.

And so, ‘tis the season to profess our love. Some do so by giving gifts, or lighting candles or singing carols. Others simply observe the festivities in silence and bask in wonder at the certainty others proclaim. ‘Tis the season to profess our love. Some do as families gather at the holiday table, not to convince one another of their beliefs, but to provide a home where all can be themselves. We all know that Aunt Joan who smiles and listens intently to us profess our theories about life. We all know that Uncle Val who engages our truth claims to the point of helping us experience that blissful state of unknowing.

‘Tis’ the season to use faith, to reason, to sit together at the edge of the canyon of doubt and ponder the vastness of all that we do not know; to hold one another when we are launched into the space of grief and spin in wonder at the vastness of our despair; to walk with one another into the sunrise of humility and giggle at the simplicity of gifts that never go out of style: reason need not be a weapon but a tool; faith need not be a poison but a remedy. Together faith and reason inspire us to practice humility and to embrace our common humanity.

I have to laugh at the certainty by which this talk is delivered.

¹ Armstrong, Karen (2009) *The Case for God*

² p. 325-326

³ p. xv

⁴ p. 327

⁵ p. xvi

⁶ p. 319

⁷ p. 319

⁸ p. 318