

Sermon – June 20, 2010  
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Last year on this same Gay Pride weekend, and totally coincidentally, I decided to come out of the closet myself. Not the closet that we normally associate with that phrase, but the closet of atheism in a Christian environment. The response to that sermon was far more positive and supportive than I expected – some of you allowed as how it gave you the freedom to profess a similar belief (or lack thereof, as the case may be). Several fellowship groups invited me to speak with them and answer questions, and I was even inducted as the first, and probably only, woman member of the Yacht & Donut Club.

Many of the questions that people have asked have to do with the external trappings of Christianity and how I view them, and particularly how my atheism affects my view of the Christian scriptures, the Holy Bible of the faith.

So this morning I'd like to first recap what I think it means to be an atheist and then talk with you for a few minutes about the Bible, where it came from, what's in it, and what I think its role is in the life of a contemporary Christian atheist.

Let me start with that term: Christian atheist. In short, that means that I do not believe in the traditionally conceived God of Judaism and Christianity, but that I nevertheless see myself as a moral, ethical, and basically good person doing her best to make the world a slightly better place for my having existed. Atheism, or godlessness, has historically been associated with evil and immorality, in spite of the fact that untold evils have been done in the name of God and religion.

So I am an a-theist, which means that I am not a theist. The doctrine of theism offers us a personal god who created the universe and is continually involved in the affairs of humankind. From this perspective, God watches over us all, is loving and compassionate, all-seeing, a benevolent being who has only our best interests in mind. This God is one to whom we can pray and who answers our prayers, one with his or her hands on the levers of the world, managing, manipulating, and sometimes punishing.

My issues with this concept of God are many, based on the advances of science and our understanding of creation and nature, but they are also based on simple logic. Bart Ehrmann, a renowned New Testament scholar, calls it God's problem. It's also known in religious studies as the "theodicy" issue, and it goes like this.

God is conceived of as being omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent: all-seeing, all-powerful, and all-loving. And yet evil exists. How can that be? It is not possible for God to be all three. If God is all-seeing and all-powerful and evil exists, then God cannot be all-loving. If God

is all loving and all-powerful and evil exists, then God cannot be all-seeing – there must be things that he or she does not know about in order for bad things to happen. If God is all-seeing and all-loving and evil exists, then God cannot be all-powerful, or he or she would not allow bad things to happen. In other words, in the presence of evil, it is not logically possible for God to have all of the attributes normally attributed to the Christian concept of a theistic deity.

Christians have spent a great deal of time and effort, and spilled a lot of ink over the centuries, trying to explain this paradox, and to my mind, have failed miserably. Sometimes the existence of evil is attributed to the free will that God gave humankind, as a sort of test to see if we really could be good, but why would an all-benevolent God want to give humans the capability of being evil in the first place? And how does that account for the tragedy of natural disasters that claim so many lives and result in so much suffering? Some say those are punishments for our sins, but I don't buy that. Surely the innocent die along with the sinners in earthquakes, typhoons, floods, and fires.

There are more logical issues as well, such as what kind of all-loving God would ask a father to kill his only son in order to test his faith? And what kind of God would say to Joshua to kill every living thing in the land of Canaan because the place really belonged to him and not to the multitudes who already lived there? I could go on, and if you are interested, I'd love to talk with you in another setting when we have more time and can have a real dialogue on the subject. But today I'd like to move on to the subject of the Christian scriptures and how at least one atheist views them.

So what is the Bible and how did it come to be anyhow? The New Testament consists of 27 books and was written by maybe 16 or 17 authors over a period of about 70 years. The Old Testament is comprised of 39 books (not counting the Apocrypha) and was written by dozens of authors over at least 600 years. Neither one of them was compiled in its present form until several centuries after the birth of Christ. And there were many other writings floating around which were candidates for inclusion in the canon but did not make the cut for one reason or another.

My mother always used to say that it was a “collection of myths and legends.” She used those terms in a pejorative sense – from her point of view, myths and legends were empty stories with no particular value. I happen to agree with Mom in her categorization of the Bible as myths and legends, but I see them in a completely different context, one that has a much more positive connotation.

Every human culture has a set of defining stories. These stories, these myths and legends if you will, come into being to explain who we are, where we came from, and why we exist. They describe the values and prescribe the ethics that give our society structure and the necessary boundaries for human beings to live, work, and play together. They tell us what we should not do

and what the consequences will be of breaking rules and violating taboos. In a way, they can be thought of as defining humanity over and against the rest of the animal kingdom.

For Western culture, what is often called Judeo-Christian society, the Bible has been a primary source of our defining stories for the last two thousand years. And for Christians, that source has been largely in what we call the New Testament, the stories of Jesus and Paul and the early years of the faith. So this morning, because we cannot do more than just touch on the subject in the time we have together, I am going to focus on the New Testament.

Some people believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. I never thought that – there are simply too many contradictions and errors for it to be the product of an infallible divine being. Read all four gospel accounts of the scene at the tomb on Easter morning, for example. Exactly who went to the tomb first? Did they encounter one man, two men, an angel, Jesus? What happened next? And what about the cleansing of the temple? In Mark it happens the week before Jesus dies. In John, it is the first public event of his three-year ministry. In Matthew, there are no shepherds present at the birth of Jesus, only the wise men who arrive some time later. The wise men don't appear in Luke, but the shepherds do. When we create a manger scene with both, we are in a sense writing our own gospel story by conflating those two versions.

Another common view of the Bible is that, although, it was written by human hands, it was divinely inspired. I used to say that, but I don't think I ever really believed that either. Why would I consider the Bible to be any more divinely inspired than other great works of literature or poetry? And if they are all divinely inspired, then what gives the Bible pride of place or authority?

So where did the New Testament come from and how did it get into the form we know today?

As I already mentioned, there are 27 books in our New Testament, but there were many more candidates for inclusion as the early church struggled with a variety of interpretations about who and what Jesus was and what it meant to be a Christian. Jesus did not establish Christianity – he was a radical Jewish reformer who caused no end of trouble for the Roman overseers of the Palestinian lands. He was not establishing a new religion – it was only his later followers who saw him in that light. And those followers were never in agreement about what that new religion should look like, disagreeing especially over whether or not the Jewish law had to be followed by Christians and what the exact nature of Jesus was.

The Ebionites, for example, were strict Jewish monotheists, who did not think that Jesus was divine. He was not born of a virgin, everyone knew his parents were Joseph and Mary, for heaven's sake; he was a very righteous man whom God adopted as his son.

The Marcionites, at the opposite end of the theological spectrum, understood Paul as the great hero of the faith, although they thought that Paul did not go far enough in repudiating the Jewish law. The God of the Old Testament created the world but pretty much made a hash of the whole thing, so the God of Jesus came along to sort things out and save people from the wrath of the Old Testament God. In this interpretation, Jesus was not a human being in any sense of the word because that would have made him part of the imperfect world created by the Old Testament God. Jesus only appeared to be human – a view that is also called “docetism” from the Greek word meaning “to seem” or “to appear.”

Then there were the Gnostics, who had their own range of variations, but who all pretty much believed that some human beings do not come from earth but from a heavenly realm and are simply entrapped in the evil confines of the human body. We need to learn to escape and for that we need secret knowledge, or gnosis. Jesus is a divine being who has come to earth to communicate the secret gnosis of salvation to those entrapped souls. Some Gnostics agreed with the Marcionites that Jesus only appeared to be human, but most of them believed that he was a human being only temporarily inhabited by a divine being, from the time he was baptized (remember the dove?) and the time of his death. When he cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” it was then that the divine Christ left Jesus to die alone.

And then, of course, there were what have been called the “proto-orthodox” Christians, because it was their brand of Christianity which ultimately triumphed and became the orthodoxy which has been handed down to us as if it were the original, pure, and only version of Christianity which ever existed. Some have said that a more accurate term for this version might be Paulinity. Although there were variations on this theme as well, and continued to be throughout history, the shapers of what we know as Christianity essentially argued against all the other versions at once, which led to some interesting and, to my mind, totally unexplainable, paradoxes. They agreed with the Ebionites that Jesus was fully human but disagreed with them when they said he was not God. They agreed with the Marcionites that Jesus was divine, but disagreed with them when they said he was not human. How can you have it both ways? By saying he was both, of course, which opened a whole other can of theological worms as the church fathers wrestled with how exactly that works and what it means to have two gods in a religion that has professed unwavering belief in only one god.

All of these groups of early Christians had a range of books that they considered sacred authorities and that they saw as supporting their particular beliefs. There were many gospels – of Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Judas Iscariot, Peter, the infant Jesus – and many acts of apostles and followers of Jesus – John, Andrew, Thecla, Thomas. There is an infancy gospel of Jesus which has him flying around and being a basically mischievous five-year-old. There are additional letters and apocalypses, or revelations, as well.

The books that made it into the canon of the New Testament all come out of the proto-orthodox wing of the early Christian church, but even they could not agree on exactly what should be included. The list of 27 that are in our Bibles today was set down by Athanasius in the year 367 AD. In that era before the standardization of the calendar, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, wrote a letter to his churches each year to tell them when Easter was to be celebrated. He always included a great deal of additional pastoral advice and in 367 listed the books that could be read in church. Although that list of 27 has survived to the present day, Athanasius's list certainly did not end the discussion or the debate. Even Martin Luther wanted to ditch a couple of the books but eventually bowed to the power of history.

That means it took three hundred years of debate before the question of what was canonical, what constituted the authority of scripture, even came close to reaching closure. It was a very human process driven by a large number of historical and cultural factors.

And that is essentially how I see the Bible, as a very human book. It has become the foundation of much of our culture and society and as such should be studied and understood by every thinking person. It underlies and is alluded to in our literature, in our historical understanding of ourselves, and even in our everyday sayings and references. I think it's important to know as much about that foundation as we can so that we, as thinking and reasoning people, can make the best decisions possible about how we want to live our lives. I don't think the Bible is irrelevant by any stretch of the imagination, but I do believe that it has to be approached from a socio-political perspective. We need to understand what was going on in the lives of the people who were writing and being written about, we need to grasp *their* context, so that we can evaluate the different biblical messages and see which ones are particularly germane to our own situations as American Christians living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So that's my basic approach to the Bible. I don't believe it is the word of God, or even divinely inspired by God, because I don't believe that such a divine being exists. And I haven't "lost my faith," either. I have faith in the human community, in our ability to care for and love one another, in our commitment to doing good in the world, and in the value of studying and understanding our Christian history, including the Bible, so that we can make the world a slightly better place for each of us having passed through it.