

Reflection: “Atheist: Without a Doubt, With Every Doubt” by Rebecca Wheeler

Here’s how the exchange usually goes: In a conversation about the nature of existence, we inevitably to get around to the supernatural. I name my stance – atheist. But then, also inevitably, my conversation partner challenges:

“Atheist? Are you sure? Don’t you mean agnostic? Surely, you can’t know there is no god.”

I re-affirm, “Atheist. Without a doubt. I know there is no god, just like I know that the Easter Bunny is our human creation, and that thunder and lightning come from atmospheric conditions, not the work of Thor.”

Indeed, I’ve owned atheism since I was 8. I remember the day in the historic St. John’s Episcopal Church of Georgetown when, sitting in the sanctuary, I considered the world and decided, “God? Nope.”

Since then, I’ve never wavered. At age 10 or 12, I refused Episcopal confirmation. And at 18, I left the Christian church, never returning again.

I appreciate the comedian Ricky Gervais’ take on conceptual problem of supreme beings.

“Since the beginning of recorded history, which is defined by the invention of writing by the Sumerians around 6,000 years ago, historians have cataloged over 3,700 supernatural beings, of which 2,870 can be considered deities. So next time someone tells me they believe in God, I’ll say, ‘Oh, which one? Zeus? Hades? Jupiter? Mars? Odin? Thor? Krishna? Vishnu? Ra?’” If they say, ‘Just God. I believe in the one God,’ I’ll point out that they are nearly as atheistic as me. I don’t believe in 2,870 gods, and they don’t believe in 2,869.”

You know, regarding the job descriptions of these gods, a curious coincidence has struck me; wherever humankind doesn’t understand causes, effects, reasons, or outcomes in the natural world or in life, that’s where ‘god’ crops up. Indeed, it seems that the very notion of god is isomorphic with – identical to – absence of an answer.

I was discussing this co-incidence – god and the unknown -- with a philosophy major at my university. Very matter of factly, he replied, “oh, you’re talking about God of the Gaps.”

“God of the Gaps” is not a new idea: Frederick Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, proclaimed “... into every gap they put their delusion, their stopgap, which they called God.”

Recently, The Humanist has commented, “if a phenomenon doesn’t have an immediate explanation, then it can be credited to a deity.” Alternatively said, “If we can’t explain a phenomenon, God did it.”

Personally, instead of positing a supernatural explanation for what we don't know or don't understand, I embrace the questions. I embrace unknowing itself. There, I find mystery, sustenance. I love the image of an infinite cosmos that we likely cannot understand.

So, when the Jehovah's Witnesses come to the door these days, instead of becoming angry at the presumption of Christianity, I reply: "Oh, thank you. I've got my cosmology. I'm a Unitarian Universalist. We affirm the findings of science, and the human insights of philosophy, literature, poetry and art."

"But what about when you die" they ask. "What about your soul?"

I reply, "What soul? We are chemical beings. My consciousness ends at the end of my chemistry. The being that was me decomposes to the atomic level. Indeed, the substance that was Rebecca will soon constitute the warp and weft of the cosmos. W.O.W."

And so, yes, I am an atheist. No supernatural, non-explanations for me, thanks. I thrill to the vast cosmos, to its sheer ineffability – to what we cannot know and cannot say. I'll take the questions any time. Yes, I am an atheist, without a doubt, with every doubt.