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Opinion

America doesn't need more God. It needs more atheists.



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I like to say that my kids made me an atheist. But really what they did was make me honest.

I was raised Jewish — with Sabbath prayers and religious school, a bat mitzvah and a Jewish wedding. But I don't remember ever truly believing that God was out there listening to me sing songs of praise.

I thought of God as a human invention: a character, a concept, a carry-over from an ancient time.

I thought of him as a fiction.

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Today I realize that means I'm an atheist. It's not complicated. My (non)belief derives naturally from a few basic observations:

1. The Greek myths are obviously stories. The Norse myths are obviously stories. L. Ron Hubbard obviously made that stuff up. Extrapolate.
2. The holy books underpinning some of the bigger theistic religions are riddled with "facts" now disproved by science and "morality" now disavowed by modern adherents. Extrapolate.
3. Life is confusing and death is scary. Naturally, humans want to believe that someone capable is in charge and that we continue to live after we die. But wanting doesn't make it so.
4. Child rape. War. Etc.

And yet, when I was younger, I would never have called myself an atheist — not on a survey, not to my family, not even to myself.

Being an "atheist," at least according to popular culture, seems to require so much work. You have to complain to the school board about the Pledge of Allegiance, stamp over "In God We Trust" on all your paper money and convince Grandma not to go to church. You have to be PhD-from-Oxford smart, irritated by Christmas and shruggingly unmoved by Michelangelo's "Pietà." That isn't me — but those are the stereotypes.

And then there are the data. Studies have shown that many, many Americans don't trust atheists. They don't want to vote for atheists, and they don't want their children to marry atheists. Researchers have found that even atheists presume serial killers are more likely to be atheist than not.

Given all this, it's not hard to see why atheists often prefer to keep quiet about it. Why I kept quiet. I wanted to be liked!

But when I had children — when it hit me that I was responsible for teaching my children everything — I wanted, above all, to tell them the truth.

Their first atheist lesson was completely impromptu. Noah was 5, Jesse was 3, and we were sitting on the couch before bed reading from "D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths," a holdover from my childhood bookshelf. One of the boys asked what a "myth" was, and I told them it was a story about how the world works. People used to believe that these gods were in charge of what happened on Earth, and these stories helped explain things they didn't understand, like winter or stars or thunder. "See" — I flipped ahead and found a picture — "Zeus has a thunderbolt."

"They don't believe them anymore?" No, I said. That's why they call it "myth." When people still believe it, they call it "religion." Like the stories about God and Moses that we read at Passover or the ones about Jesus and Christmas.

The little pajama-clad bodies nodded, and on we read.

That was it — the big moment. It was probably also the easiest moment.

Before one son became preoccupied with death. Before the other son had to decide whether to be bar mitzvahed. Before my daughter looked up from her math homework one day to ask, "How do we know there's no God?"

Religion offers ready-made answers to our most difficult questions. It gives people ways to mark time, celebrate and mourn. Once I vowed not to teach my children anything I did not personally believe, I had to come up with new answers. But I discovered as I went what most parents discover: You can figure it out as you go.

Establishing a habit of honesty did not sap the delight from my children's lives or destroy their moral compass. I suspect it made my family closer than we would have been had my husband and I pretended to our children that we believed in things we did not. We sowed honesty and reaped trust — along with intellectual challenge, emotional sustenance and joy.

Those are all personal rewards. But there are political rewards as well.

My children know how to distinguish fact from fiction — which is harder for children raised religious. They don't assume conventional wisdom is true and they do expect arguments to be based on evidence. Which means they have the skills to be engaged, informed and savvy citizens.

We need citizens like that.

Lies, lying and disinformation suffuse mainstream politics as never before. A recent Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 29 percent of Americans believe that President Biden was not legitimately elected, a total composed of those who think there is solid evidence of fraud (22 percent) and those who think there isn't (7 percent). I don't know which is worse: believing there to be evidence of fraud when even the Trump campaign can't find any or asserting the election was stolen even though you know there's no proof.

Meanwhile, we are just beginning to grasp that artificial intelligence could develop an almost limitless power to deceive — threatening the ability of even the most alert citizen to discern what's real.

We need Americans who demand — as atheists do — that truth claims be tethered to fact. We need Americans who understand — as atheists do — that the future of the world is in our hands. And in this particular political moment, we need Americans to stand up to Christian nationalists who are using their growing political and judicial power to take away our rights. Atheists can do that.

Fortunately, there are a lot of atheists in the United States — probably far more than you think.

Some people say they believe in God, but not the kind favored by monotheistic religions — a conscious supreme being with powers of intercession or creation. When they say "God" they mean cosmic oneness or astonishing coincidences. They mean that sense of smallness-within-largeness they've felt while standing on the shore of the ocean or holding a newborn baby or hearing the final measures of Chopin's "Fantaisie-Impromptu."

So, why do those people use the word "God" at all? The philosopher Daniel C. Dennett argues in "Breaking the Spell" that since we know we're supposed to believe in God, when we don't believe in a supernatural being we give the name instead to things we do believe in, such as transcendent moments of human connection.

Whatever the case, in 2022, Gallup found that 81 percent of Americans believe in God, the lowest percentage yet recorded. This year, when it gave respondents the option of saying

they're not sure, it found that only 74 percent believe in God, 14 percent weren't sure, and 12 percent did not believe.

Not believing in God — that's the very definition of atheism. But when people go around counting atheists, the number they come up with is far lower than that. The most recent number from Pew Research Center is 4 percent.

What's with the gap? That's anti-atheist stigma (and pro-belief bias) at work. Everybody's keeping quiet, because everybody wants to be liked. Some researchers, recognizing this problem, developed a workaround.

In 2017, psychologists Will Gervais and Maxine Najle tried to estimate the prevalence of atheism in the United States using a technique called "unmatched count": They asked two groups of 1,000 respondents each, how many statements were true among a list of statements. The lists were identical except that one of them included the statement "I believe in God." By comparing the numbers, the researchers could then estimate the percentage of atheists without ever asking a direct question. They came up with around 26 percent.

If that's true or even close, there are more atheists in the United States than Catholics.

Do you know what some of those atheists call themselves? Catholics. And Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists. General Social Survey data back this up: Among religious Americans, only 64 percent are certain about the existence of God. Hidden atheists can be found not just among the "nones," as they're called — the religiously unaffiliated — but also in America's churches, mosques and synagogues.

"If you added up all the nominal Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. — those who are religious in name only," Harvard humanist chaplain Greg M. Epstein writes in "Good Without God," "you really might get the largest denomination in the world."

Atheists are everywhere. And we are unusually disposed to getting stuff done.

I used to say, when people asked me what atheists do believe, that it was simple: Atheists believe that God is a human invention.

But now, I think it's more than that.

If you are an atheist — if you do not believe in a Supreme Being — you can be moral or not, mindful or not, clever or not, hopeful or not. Clearly, you can keep going to church. But, by definition, you cannot believe that God is in charge. You must give up the notion of God's will, God's purpose, God's mysterious ways.

In some ways, this makes life easier. You don't have to work out why God might cause or ignore suffering, what parts of this broken world are God's plan, or what work is his to do and what is yours.

But you also don't get to leave things up to God. Atheists must accept that people are allowing — we are allowing — women to die in childbirth, children to go hungry, men to buy guns that can slaughter dozens of people in minutes. Atheists believe people organized the world as it is now, and only people can make it better.

No wonder we are “the most politically active group in American politics today,” according to political scientist Ryan Burge, interpreting data from the Cooperative Election Study.

That’s right: Atheists take more political action — donating to campaigns, protesting, attending meetings, working for politicians — than any other “religious” group. And we vote. In his study on this data, sociologist Evan Stewart noted that atheists were about 30 percent more likely to vote than religiously affiliated respondents.

We also vote far more than most religiously unaffiliated people. That’s what distinguishes atheists from the “nones” — and what I didn’t realize at first.

Atheists haven’t just checked out of organized religion. (Indeed, we may not have.) We haven’t just rejected belief in God. (Though, obviously, that’s the starting point.) Where atheism becomes a definite stance rather than a lack of direction, a positive belief and not just a negative one, is in our understanding that, without a higher power, we need human power to change the world.

I want to be clear: There are clergy members and congregations all across this country working to do good, not waiting for God to answer their prayers or assuming that God meant for the globe to get hotter. You don’t have to be an atheist to conduct yourself as if people are responsible for the world they live in — you just have to act like an atheist, by taking matters into your own hands.

Countless good people of faith do just that. But one thing they can’t do as well as atheists is push back against the outsize cultural and political power of religion itself.

That power is crushing some of our most vulnerable citizens. And I don’t mean my fellow atheists. Atheists, it’s true, are subject to discrimination and scapegoating; somehow we’re to blame for moral chaos, mass shootings and whatever the “trans cult” is. Yes, we are technically barred from serving as jurors in the state of Maryland or joining a Boy Scout troop anywhere, but we do not, as a group, suffer anything like the prejudice that, say, LGBTQ+ people face. It’s not even close.

Peel back the layers of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, though, and you find religion. Peel back the layers of control over women’s bodies — from dress codes that punish girls for male desire all the way to the Supreme Court striking down *Roe v. Wade* — and you find religion. Often, there isn’t much peeling to do. According to the bill itself, Missouri’s total abortion ban was created “in recognition that Almighty God is the author of life.” Say what, now?

Peel back the layers of abstinence-only or marriage-centered or anti-homosexual sex education and you find religion. “Don’t say gay” laws, laws denying trans kids medical care, school-library book bans and even efforts to suppress the teaching of inconvenient historical facts — motivated by religion.

And when religion loses a fight and progress wins instead? Religion then claims it’s not subject to the resulting laws. “Religious belief” is — more and more, at the state and federal levels — a way to sidestep advances the country makes in civil rights, human rights and public health.

In 45 states and D.C., parents can get religious exemptions from laws that require schoolchildren to be vaccinated. Seven states allow pharmacists to refuse to fill contraceptive prescriptions because of their religious beliefs. Every business with a federal contract has to

comply with federal nondiscrimination rules — unless it's a religious organization. Every employer that provides health insurance has to comply with the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate — unless it's, say, a craft supply store with Christian owners.

Case by case, law by law, our country's commitment to the first right enumerated in our Bill of Rights — “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” — is faltering. The Supreme Court has ruled that the citizens of Maine have to pay for parochial school, that a high school football coach should be free to lead a prayer on the 50-yard line, that a potential wedding website designer can reject potential same-sex clients. This past summer, Oklahoma approved the nation's first publicly funded religious school. This fall, Texas began allowing schools to employ clergy members in place of guidance counselors.

You don't have to be an atheist to worry about the structural integrity of Thomas Jefferson's “wall of separation between Church & State.” You don't have to be an atheist to think that religion should not shape public policy or that believers should have to follow the laws that everyone else does. You don't have to be an atheist to see that Christian nationalists are using “religious liberty” to perpetuate much of the discrimination Americans suffer today.

But atheists can do one thing about the country's drift into theocracy that our religious neighbors won't: We can tell people we don't believe in God. The more people who do that, the more we normalize atheism in America, the easier it will be — for both politicians and the general public — to usher religion back out of our laws.

Okay, but should you say you're an atheist even if you believe in “God” as the power of nature or something like that?

Yes. It does no one any favors — not the country, not your neighbors — to say you believe in God metaphorically when there are plenty of people out there who literally believe that God is looking down from heaven deciding which of us to cast into hell.

In fact, when certain believers wield enough political power to turn their God's presumed preferences into law, I would say it's dangerous to claim you believe in “God” when what you actually believe in is awe or wonder. (Your “God is love” only lends validity and power to their “God hates gays.”)

So ask yourself: Do I think a supernatural being is in charge of the universe?

If you answer “no,” you're an atheist. That's it — you're done.

But if you go further: You'll be doing something good for your country.

When I started raising my kids as atheists, I wasn't particularly honest with the rest of the world. I wasn't everybody's mom, right? Plus, I had to get along with other people. Young parents need community, and I was afraid to risk alienating new parent friends by being honest about being — looks both ways, lowers voice — an atheist.

But, in addition to making me be honest inside our home, my children pushed me to start being honest on the outside. In part, I wanted to set an example for them, and in part, I wanted to help change the world they would face.

It shouldn't be hard to say you don't believe in God. It shouldn't be shocking or shameful. I know that I'm moral and respectful and friendly. And the more I say to people that I'm an atheist —

me, the mom who taught the kindergarten class about baking with yeast and brought the killer cupcakes to the bake sale — the more people will stop assuming that being an atheist means being ... a serial killer.

And then? The more I say I'm an atheist, the more other people will feel comfortable calling themselves atheists. And the stigma will gradually dissolve.

Can you imagine? If we all knew how many of us there are?

It would give everyone permission to be honest with their kids and their friends, to grapple with big questions without having to hold on to beliefs they never embraced.

And it would take away permission, too. Permission to pass laws (or grant exemptions to laws) based on the presumed desires of a fictional creation. Permission to be cruel to fellow human beings based on Bible verses. Permission to eschew political action in favor of "thoughts and prayers."

I understand that, to many people, this might sound difficult or risky. It took me years to declare myself an atheist, and I was raised Reform Jewish, I live in the Northeast, I'm White, I work at home, and my family and friends are a liberal bunch. The stakes were low for me. For some, I fully concede, the stakes are too high.

If you think you'd lose your job or put your children at risk of harassment for declaring your atheism, you get a pass. If you would be risking physical harm, don't speak out. If you're an atheist running for school board somewhere that book bans are on the agenda, then feel free to keep it quiet, and God bless.

But for everyone else who doesn't believe in God and hasn't said so? Consider that your honesty will allow others to be honest, and that your reticence encourages others to keep quiet. Consider that the longer everyone keeps quiet, the longer religion has political and cultural license to hurt people. Consider that the United States — to survive as a secular democracy — needs you now more than ever.

And the next time you find yourself tempted to pretend that you believe in God? Tell the truth instead.