

Ephesians 2:11-22
July 18, 2021
"Atheists No Longer"
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In about the year 160 AD, Roman government officials led a man into the public arena in Smyrna (Izmir, in modern day Turkey), an elderly man by the name of Polycarp, who was the Christian bishop of the city. There he was shortly thereafter bound and burned at the stake. His crime? His refusal to abandon his "**atheism**", and offer religious sacrifice to the Emperor. From *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* [<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/martyrdompoly carp.html>]:

And as he was brought forward, the tumult [of the crowd] became great when they heard that [it was] Polycarp...and when he came near, the [Roman] Proconsul...sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying..."Swear by the fortune of Cæsar; repent, and say, 'Away with the Atheists!'" But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them...said, "[Yes,] away with the Atheists!"

What we learn from this -- the earliest story of Christian martyrdom outside of the NT -- is that "atheist" is actually a *relative term*.

The Romans threw the charge at anyone who refused to worship the Emperor as a god, and it was a charge which could get you put to death. (Jews were, by the way, excepted from this law because the Romans -- as a matter of wise imperial policy -- considered theirs to be what they termed a "**venerable**" religion.) Not so with the Christians, however, who professed to follow a rather *new* God they called "Christ". The Romans martyred a considerable number of Christians over their early centuries of the Church, as *subversives*, a threat to the political order; *not* to worship the Emperor was like being against "God, motherhood, and apple pie".

Interestingly, it was the charge of "**atheist**" which was prominent in what came to be called the political "witch-hunts" conducted by Sen. Joseph McCarthy in 1950s America. His crusade began with a speech in 1950, in which he said,

"Today we are engaged in a final, all-out battle between communistic **atheism** and Christianity. The modern champions of communism have selected this as the time. And, ladies and gentlemen, the chips are down—they are truly down."

McCarthy -- who believed the country had been *infiltrated* in the realm of both government and the arts by *secret* communists -- struck a chord with a great many of his fellow Americans, who found themselves by the middle of that decade living in **high anxiety** over the possibility of the collapse of the American way of life under the threat of, not *just* communism, but what was usually referred to as "**godless**" communism. Such people needed, he believed, to be *exposed* and -- perhaps not quite as brutally as Polycarp -- *gotten rid of*. It comes as no surprise, then, that it wasn't *until* the 1950s that The Pledge of Allegiance was changed to include the phrase, "Under God", and the phrase, "In God We Trust" first appeared on the dollar bill.

First-century *Jews*, of course, looked on the *Romans* -- i.e., "Gentiles" (non-Jews) -- as the *real* atheists. And we hear Paul -- formerly a *zealous* Jew -- in the reading from Eph. 2 this morning -- writing to Gentile Christians, reminding them of their former status:

Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

That phrase he uses -- "without God in the world" translates a single Greek word, *atheoi*, from where we get our English word "atheists". Once upon a time, Paul himself could well have been one with his fellow Jews who, according to one commentator,

had an immense contempt for the Gentiles...The barrier between [Jews and Gentiles] was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the *funeral* of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death. [[William Barclay, cited in John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 91].]

In deep, fundamental ways, Romans "**othered**" Christians and Jews "**othered**" Gentiles. We do the *same* in our world. The "**other**" is not *just different* from us -- *looks* different, *dresses* differently, *talks* differently -- or *just* has a different perspective on things than we do. No, the "other" is a **threat**. The "other" is *dangerous*, and so to be **feared**. The COVID pandemic has given us all fresh training in this: the one without a **mask** on, or *unvaccinated*, can feel like a threat, someone who could make you sick just by *breathing* on you! Or the fear that the "other" -- just by *touching* you -- can make you, in some, hard-to-explain way, "**dirty**", because they are, in some, hard-to-explain way, "dirty".

Cf. the scene in the 2011 movie, "The Help", (set in 1960 Mississippi), when one of the black household maids ("Minnie" Jackson, played by Octavia Spencer) is summarily fired for using the bathroom, because of the deeply driven fear that black people were just inherently "dirty".

While American society has surely progressed over the last three generations beyond such primitive forms of making people into the "other" (as in "The Help"), the term developed by a British sociologist, Stanley Cohen, what he calls "**moral panic**", seems over recent years to be as prevalent as ever among us. According to Cohen, "moral panic" is

when "...a person *or* group of persons emerges to become defined as a **threat to societal values and interests**". While the issues identified may be *real*, the claims "*exaggerate* the seriousness, extent, typicality and/or inevitability of harm" (*Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 1973/2011).

Doesn't it seem to *you* that, perhaps especially we **white** Americans, seem to need -- maybe more than at any time since the McCarthy era -- *one or more kinds of "others"* to **blame** for our anxieties over the present shape of life in our society? Black people, brown people, people of Asian origin? Or poor people of *whatever* color or ethnicity? Non-heterosexual people? People of opposing political views? Someone, some group, to be **scapegoat**? In every case, the idea seems to be that, if we could better *control*, or *deport*, or *defeat* -- or maybe just *avoid* -- those who are causing us anxiety, of whatever sort, then everything would calm down, and would be better?

Paul, in Ephesians 2, makes it clear that this is trying to live this way is living "without God in the world" -- or, i.e., as **atheists** -- and reveals the Good News that God, through Christ, has put into motion a **much better idea** about how to live together with others and -- if you're sure you've got your pew seat belts buckled -- I will share it with you.

I hope you remember how I last week quoted Will Willimon's comment on the whole of Ephesians, as presenting a vision that is "**large, grand, and cosmic**"? Well, that's nowhere more true anywhere in Paul's letter than in the passage we read today. God's better idea, says Paul, is to build a **new temple** in the world ("a dwelling place for God", v. 22) -- bearing *no relation whatsoever*, by the way, to the "third" temple which fundamentalist Jews in Israel are hoping, one day, to build on the ancient Temple Mount in Jerusalem, when they *finally* succeed in driving out the "others", *viz.*, the Muslims, out for good. No, the *new* temple which God envisions, says Paul, is a **living temple**, built out of **human lives** -- the lives of all the people whom *we* make into "others" *and* all those who make *us* into "others" -- into a **beautiful and powerful unity**, by the work of the Holy Spirit, granting **all** peoples "access...to the Father" (v. 18), and the response of all peoples who will *accept* this "access".

Cf. Rev. 21:2. At the end of the Bible, God comes down to dwell among God's people.

Now, if we're honest, this kind of talk is utterly mind-blowing, and has, really, little -- or nothing -- to do with why we signed up to be a part of the Church in the first place. We signed up (or maybe our parents *in effect* signed us up?) for *simpler, much* less "large, grand and cosmic" reasons. We thought being a Christian involved -- really -- just going to worship occasionally and, of course, paying in some amount of financial support, and also being willing on occasion to give some time to some worthwhile volunteer effort in the community.

And, of course, "the sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life."

This was once, of course, the perhaps *predominant* form of Christian self-understanding and practice in America, the idea being that any good American citizen is also -- kind of, sort of, at least within *reason*, within *limits*

-- a Christian, the old "God, motherhood, and apple pie" kind of Christian practice.

Given, however, that this way of being a Christian, and being the Church in our culture has now lost, not only its **currency** but also its **power to inspire** -- among us who are the Church, as well as those who outside the Church -- a vision of life together *much* more hopeful than the *sustained fear of the "other"*, we need to take Paul seriously when he urges us to inhabit the reality that, as the Church, our **citizenship** has actually been *changed*: "You are," he says, "...citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (v. 19).

Until we claim *that* citizenship, in that realm and reality, we won't be able to be of the kind of help we could be, and which others need us to be, in our lives and relationships with others, in our citizenship as Americans.