



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 12, 2013

## Letter to a Lost Unitarian

An old schoolmate sent me an e-mail I received late one afternoon that turned out to be food for thought. I pondered it all through an early dinner and over dessert. Then I answered as follows:

Dear Kathy:

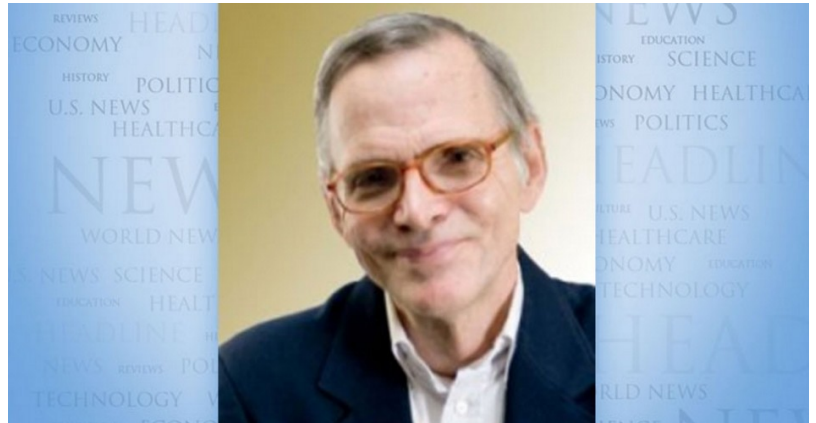
I'm not sure why I should be disappointed after someone had already told me she is a Unitarian. But I was, sort of, let down when you confessed to being an atheist. I guess I was more or less hoping you might be a "high-church" Unitarian, which as George Will has observed, is sort of like being a very liberal Republican. A "high-church" Unitarian would make you more or less like that pathetic excuse for a Catholic priest, the Jesuit from Fairfield University, who wandered into one of our seminars years ago and could not, or would not, tell you if he believed Jesus Christ was the divine Son of God. (Do you remember asking him that?)

I might have at least hoped you were an agnostic, rather than an atheist. Then you could, as Garrison Keillor suggested, come to my house at night and burn a question mark on my lawn. Reviewing what you have said here, I realize how little has changed in the last 40 years — or 400 or more years. Indeed, in a few years we will be observing, and much of Christendom will be celebrating, the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran revolt, marked by the nailing of the 95 theses on the church door at Wittenburg.

Today's world seems to have too little time for 95 theses. It barely has time for the question mark. There seems little time for debate, political or theological. Again George Will: "It was a Lincoln-Douglas debate, except there was no Lincoln, no Douglas and precious little debate." You are, I think, more aware than most, but many people seem to think the old heresies are newly discovered truths. And you may think that your doctrines, if I may call them that, are benign. I believe they are potentially cruel, tyrannical, and dangerous.

You say, for example, it is possible to be "good without God." True, I suppose, though even Jesus disputed the idea that He was good except by virtue of being One with the Father and acting in accordance with His will. "Let us with caution," said Washington in his [Farewell Address](#), "indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion." And in the same speech he observed: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports." Adams and Madison made similar observations. The idea seemed to be that if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him — for the sake of both freedom and security.

I know there are virtuous pagans, but they do not have no god, they have many. And whether, as





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Jefferson said, a man has one god or 20, neither picks my pocket nor breaks my bones. What matters, I would add, is whether he believes the question of what is good and what is evil has been decided long before he arrived on the scene. But a popular notion has it that each generation, nay each individual, decides for himself and herself what is good and what is evil. A slippery slope, that. For if we regard the Ten Commandments as merely the opinion of Moses and his God, then what boundaries do we have left? The God of Moses says, "Thou Shalt Not Steal," But if Marx or Lenin are of a different opinion and offer a conflicting commandment, who are God and Moses to object? And if the God of Moses says, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot all have given instructions to the contrary. The United Nations may condemn genocide, but Stalin has decreed that while one death is a tragedy, a million are a statistic. The pope may condemn wars of aggression, but Stalin asked, "How many divisions does the pope have?"

Your moral universe is not unlike the one described in the Dred Scott decision, in which it was decreed that the black man has no rights the white man is bound to respect. Now you, the kind, caring person that you are, may respect the rights of all. But as either an atheist or an agnostic, you recognize no external moral order requiring you to do so. And I have no reason to assume that the next atheist or agnostic, however vaguely "spiritual," will believe and behave as you do. In the absence of a universally recognized objective moral order, I would be nervous in a roomful, let alone a world full, of Unitarians.

I believe you are better than your philosophy, and in your kindness you may believe me to be better than mine. I'm sure you recoil at the thought of the Crusades and the Inquisition. Yet in our benevolent, enlightened time, we kill human beings before they are born to assure they don't pollute or overpopulate the world, or burden the personal freedom of unwilling mothers. We are coming up on the 40th anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision. The estimate I have seen is that every day in the United States there are about 4,000 abortions. That is roughly the equivalent of 200 Sandy Hook/Newton, Connecticut slaughters of the innocent — every single day, 365 days a year. And this is done, applauded, and safeguarded by people who presume to know better than God and Moses what is good and what is evil.

There is no godless universe. Modern man is saying, "Move over, God, there are two of us!" Or 200 million or six billion of us. But we know the limitations of democratic government. We the people do not decide who lives and who dies. The Supreme Court did not consult us before issuing the *Roe v. Wade* decree. Barack Obama does not consult us about whom he puts on his "kill list," to be hunted down and destroyed by remote-controlled drones. What I am describing to you, Kathy, if you will only recognize it, is tyranny. And it is an even greater tyranny if you do not recognize it.

We would see more clearly and acquire less guilt if we admitted our shortsightedness. But, as Jesus told the Pharisees, we say that we see as we stumble through the darkness, and our evils multiply. Thomas Jefferson saw more clearly than most of his countrymen when he realized the institution of slavery — of which he was, sadly, a practitioner — would bring the country to the brink of self-destruction. You may reject the thought of judgment and hellfire, but Jefferson, a Unitarian of sorts, did not, when he [wrote](#): "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."



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