

Clear Days on the Religious Front

The comedy of modern “atheism” takes a merry twist lately in the jottings of Mr. Phil Zuckerman, professional unbeliever and counselor of those-with-nowhere-else-to-turn. Unwilling to be regarded as an atheist of common stamp, Mr. Zuckerman pedals a warm and fuzzy variety called (ugh!) “aweism.” Readers looking for a good laugh are invited to visit online the ‘Atheist Nexus’ website of September 18, 2009. There will be found the following pair of deliverances:

1. “Aweism is the belief that existence is ultimately a beautiful mystery, that being alive is a wellspring of wonder and that the deepest questions of life, death, time and space are so powerful as to inspire deep feelings of joy, poignancy and sublime awe. An aweist is someone who admits that existing is wonderfully mysterious and that life is a profound experience.”

2. “Many people have suggested that my orientation of aweism is actually a form of mysticism . . . I don’t think it is.”

Perhaps a better characterization of “aweism” would be shallow folly and self-deception, coupled with a bizarre inability to recognize self-contradiction. To borrow a trope from Arthur Schopenhauer (*The Basis of Morality*), the atheistic ‘aweist’ is like a man who attends a masked ball and spends the evening dancing and courting a disguised beauty who turns out to be his own wife. For the the category of mystery embraced by Mr. Zuckerman is the principal religious tenet of untold numbers of theologians, including perhaps most notably Gabriel Marcel. Thinkers of the ‘awest’ persuasion would have their cake and eat it too, allowing themselves to enter a sympathetic and affective relation with the nature of things, the ens realissimum, while delicately avoiding the recognition

of divinity. Flirting with God is fine, so long as we know what we're doing. Zuckerman doesn't.

Apparently it's ok to be a mystic so long as we remain puzzled. But the moment we encounter a sudden and inexplicable Insight our mystic moment shrivels to a mere mistake. The sin in such muddled thinking lies not so much in its confusion as it does in its publication. No sooner do we latch on to a dubious idea than we find ourselves impelled to share it with those poor masses yearning to babble about things above their heads. Sadly, sophistry and dissembling rarely serve as adequate replacements for candor and forthrightness. It is often said that there are no atheists in foxholes. Mr. Zuckerman would still parade under the brave banner of atheism even as it slowly dawns on him that all the world is one big foxhole.