

What Is Theism?
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April 10, 2005
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When UUA President and member of First Church, the Reverend Bill Sinkford preached his sermon “The Language of Faith” in January 2003, he touched off a heated debate within Unitarian Universalism. Along with the story of his own faith journey, and the recovery of his son from a coma (most compelling parts of sermon), Bill (explain why I call him Bill) encouraged Unitarian Universalists to embrace some “language that would allow us to capture the possibility of reverence.” This is a position he came to after his personal experiences and carefully searching our Purposes and Principles only to discover

We have in our Principles an affirmation of our faith, which uses *not one single piece of religious language*. Not one. Not even one word that would be considered traditionally religious. And this is a wonderment to me; I wonder whether this kind of language can adequately capture who we are and what we’re about.¹

Of course, this is what our senior high students have been telling us for years (at least this is what they regularly tell me) - the Principles are cold, lifeless, and wordy. Bill quotes former UUA President Gene Pickett who said of the Principles “they describe a process for approaching the religious depths but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves.” Ouch. But you know this is true. That is why we flounder to explain Unitarian Universalism to our friends and neighbors. This is why you don’t ask me to recite our Principles to you when I come to visit you in the hospital. Instead you ask me to sing or pray or read poetry (the depths themselves).

In a *New York Times* article (our heated debate made the NY Times!) later that spring Bill clarified that he was not interested in changing our Principles, only finding ways to “capture the possibility of reverence, to name the holy, to talk about human agency in theological terms.”² If he wanted to change our Principles or influence public policy I would be more concerned, but as it is, he expressed his opinion.

The wonderment to me is that his comments led to such a heated debate (the most letters, emails, and calls the UUA have received in its history).³ Bill was not asking to change anything official, but rather to draw attention to an absence and begin a dialogue. And his point is well taken when we will simmer down enough to hear him out (or read his entire comments – copies of his sermon are in the table on the lobby). First, he notes that humanists also need and use a language of reverence (which does not require the mention of “God”). His ideas on this were shaped by UU humanist, David Bumbaugh, who wrote an essay entitled “Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence.” Dick Bozian lent me a copy of the essay and informed me that the humanist group will be discussing it in the near future.

¹ Reverend Bill, Sinkford, “The Language of Faith” a sermon delivered at First Jefferson Unitarian Universalist Church, January 12, 2003.

² Richard Higgins, “A Heated Debate Flares in Unitarian Universalism,” *New York Times* (May 17, 2003)

³ Higgins.

Second, our negative reaction to a “language of reverence” and the use of “God”, does not embrace an understanding of our own liberal religious tradition and its reasoned understanding of God. When we pause to remember that Unitarian Universalism grounds its values in freedom, reason, and tolerance, the reaction to Bill’s comments becomes even more, dare I say, I will say, illogical to me. I know his words have added weight because he is the President, but even our President deserves the right to freedom of a reasoned opinion and our subsequent tolerance.

Bill’s comments were so distressing because many of us still live with orthodox ideas of God. This is ironic, given that we are liberal religionists, and those of us who do believe in God have very modern ideas about divinity. “God” can be such a divisive topic that many of us avoid it, in essence stop learning about God and what modern theists (such as myself) think about God. Last week several of our humanist members shared their theology with you. In our shared search for freedom, reason, and tolerance, here is my explanation of theism, not conversion, just dialogue. And a different theist would define God differently.

Most of us have arrived here with mixed, sometimes conflicting, images of God. Within our heads there is both the God of our parents and childhood alongside the God we threw out with critical thinking and evolution. More likely than not, our current image is but one of many we have had in our lifetime, which is certainly true for me. I was raised Christian, spent my high school and college years as an agnostic, and now consider myself a theist (someone who believes in God). In her book *Traveling Mercies*, writer Anne Lamott recalls her own mixed images of God "Mine was a patchwork God, sewn together from bits of rag and ribbon, Easter and Western, pagan and Hebrew, everything but the kitchen sink and Jesus.⁴ Lamott's words ring true for many of us here today.

Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm characterizes authoritarian or orthodox religion (which I am loosely calling the religion of our parents today) by three structural characteristics

- 1) A God who controls fate and does not permit free will
- 2) A God who is not accountable
- 3) The people are powerless and insignificant yet their obedience is demanded.⁵

God is like a Terminator parent. This was the God of my childhood. This was the God of my parents and grandparents. I do not believe in this God anymore.

For me, the God of my parents could not withstand the twentieth century, evolution, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, Watergate. All these experiences dug into traditional ideas of the all-powerful, all knowing, ever-present, authoritarian God. In her essay "The End of Theism", Dorothee Solle advocates for the end of the orthodox God of our parents. She explains

Orthodox theology, often associated with a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible, insists on a God of absolute transcendence . . . There is only a very limited adaptation to modernity . . . The God of orthodoxy is ossified and becomes an objectifiable fetish . . . From within psychology this God is the deepest symbol of an authoritarian religion. Power is more important to the authoritarian God than justice and love.⁶

And this is why some of us are so angry with God. We have seen in history, in our churches, in our families, that power can be more important to religion, than justice and love. The very reason I became an agnostic in my early adulthood was because I could not reconcile the mass suffering of the crusades to the Holy Land and the Salem witch trials with the faith of

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (1999), 41.

⁵ Solle, 177.

⁶ Dorothee Solle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (1990), 176-177.

Christianity. How could a faith that says it believes in a loving God organize and support such mass suffering? I had to agree with the Russian writer Bakunin who said, "If God did exist, we would have to abolish Him." If God created and supported these injustices, I had to abolish him. If God created and supported the religion that created these injustices, I had to abolish it as well. This God and church betrayed us, relying solely on authority when love, justice, compassion, and healing were called for as well.

In order to survive the twentieth century, God had to change. There are religions, of course, that continue with the traditional, authoritarian God of our grandparents, and many of them are quite popular. Yet, within the twentieth century liberal Judeo-Christian religions (such as Unitarian Universalism) have altered their image of God. We've seen the introduction of gender inclusive language in worship services and prayer books, as well as softened interpretations of theological concepts like predestination and salvation. Even our ideas of hell have mellowed or disappeared.

Faith is organic and continues to evolve for individuals and communities (which is why our 4th Principle is the free and responsible search for truth and meaning). Everyone has faith or belief in something (whether that be God, science, fate, people, some combination of things, or something else). Faith is faith, and it can be influenced by reason (like for those of us here no matter what our theology), but if science has taught us anything it is that life is mysterious and continues to evolve, that all things will never be known, and even the most talented scientists can and will be proven wrong. The only "logical" faith then is agnosticism, which acknowledges that we don't know. The rest of us are "illogical" atheists and theists and I am comfortable with this.

I told you I am a theist. I am more accurately speaking, a panentheist, not a pantheist (who believes that God is all and everywhere), but a panentheist (someone who believes that God is part of all yet still beyond what is known). In my image God is both transcendent (beyond us, never wholly known), and immanent (a divine spark within all living things). The Rev. Forrest Church, Minister of All Souls in New York City, refers to God as a presence that is "greater than all yet present in each". This is my image of God. I believe in a God that is immanent, transcendent, a benevolent life force that is not all powerful, but is present with us at all times. As I have developed my image of God, I used reason to resolve questions I had about God's relational qualities, gender, matter, color, goodness, and power. I want to share some of my turning points with you.

In his mystical, landmark book *I and Thou*, Jewish theologian Martin Buber explains relationship with God

That you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don't you know also that God needs you-in the fullness of his eternity, you? . . . You need God in order to be, and God needs you-for that which is the meaning of your life.⁷

How much more empowering is this image than the unaccountable, all-powerful God? "God needs you-for that which is the meaning of your life." You matter. You have free will. You have control too. We are partners with God. The idea of a need based divine-human partnership forms the basis of process theology, a twentieth century theology advocated by Charles Hartshorne and others.

The introduction of feminist theology in the 1960's and 1970's was a breakthrough as well. After two thousand years there was once again (HS-Yahweh consort) serious discussion about the gender of God. Could God be female, Goddess or She with a capital 'S'? Instead of

⁷Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (reprinted 1970 with Introduction by Walter Kaufmann), 130.

Lord, other phrases came into usage "Creator", "Redeemer", "Sustainer".⁸ For some people this was a diluted, emasculated God, for others it meant they could return to church.

With the change in name, was a remarkable change in image. Our images of women are much more gentle and healing than those of men. If God is imagined as a woman, or if even a part of God is imagined as female, God becomes more caring, more immanent. And, conversely, women become more powerful. It is no coincidence that women were able to enter the ministry at the same time as the success of feminist theology. Religion is political too. Then again, with the idea that God could be female came the idea that God is not, or should not be limited to personification. Maybe God is neither male nor female, but rather pure energy? As I mentioned, my belief is that God is a benevolent (but not all powerful) energy, or life force.

A great turning point in modern theology is the essay *God is Black*, by James H. Cone. Written in 1970, it was Cone's attempt to reconcile Christianity with justice and his experience as a black man. *God is Black* boldly champions justice and love over power. Unlike so many other Christian essays that portray suffering as an abstract notion, located somewhere far away, unimportant to issues of faith, unnecessary to the rest of us, Cone insists that human suffering takes center stage on all issues of God and faith. Cone proclaims

Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God's experience, or God is a God of racism.⁹

He goes further

Those who want to know who God is and what God is doing must know who black persons are and what they are doing . . . Knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming *one* with them, and participating in the goal of liberation. *We must become black with God.*¹⁰

Can you hear that Cone has now given God the color black? Cone refuses to accept that authority and power are more important than justice and love, or even good definitions of religion or divinity. His definition was a breakthrough for me because Cone embraced the people who so often get left behind, ignored, subjected to uncaring authoritarian religious and political powers. This ignorance and neglect is why I left organized religion for so long. However, I was and still am uneasy with the idea that God takes sides. I prefer the idea that God includes all sides and remembers first those who are the most vulnerable because I believe that God is benevolent.

In his introduction written twenty years later he explains

I still believe that "God is Black" in the sense that God's identity is found in the faces of those who are exploited and humiliated because of their color. But I also believe that "God is mother," "rice," "red," and a host of other things that give life to those whom society condemns to death . . . We can know God only in an oppressed community in struggle for justice and wholeness.¹¹

(Evolution of Cone's thought, faith as evolution. Read modern theologians - they are very much in dialogue with one another, exciting, transformative, real. Read theologians, sift,

⁸Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "God, Sexism, and Transformation" in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, editors Rebecca S. Chopp & Mark Lewis Taylor (1994), 39.

⁹James H. Cone, "God is Black" (1970), reprinted in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, editors Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite & Mary Potter Engel, (1990), 84-85.

¹⁰Cone, 86.

¹¹Cone, 83.

agree, disagree, go deeper, to resonate with ultimate meaning, what is sacred, ask if there is a weakness in my reasoning?)

Sometimes I think that the most famous theologians, men like Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, almost killed God and Christianity. In the Aquinas age of classical theology, theology became a logical proof test, divorced from human experience, reason, and need. I can barely read it. Who cares about the essence of the Holy Ghost and the proper formulation of the Trinity when people are subjected to what should be known as ungodly and inhumane? The real importance of Cone's essay is that he uses his formidable intellect and reason, and all the powers of his education in classical theology, and then he demands our attention on human suffering. Cone insists that God remain in our daily lives, particularly in our greatest humiliation and pain. The day I read "God is Black" I knew I could trust God again. Cone's God is one of true love and justice.

Perhaps no event has so upset twentieth century theology as the Holocaust. Although genocide had happened earlier in the century, this event, so obvious in its religious persecution and murder, forced the issue of theodicy, the justification of God in the face of evil. I myself felt that in order to believe in God I had to morally resolve the issue of theodicy. Does God have the power to control suffering? I read with great interest Cone's final analysis in "God is Black" which recognizes both God's power and the reality of human suffering. Cone ends by explaining, "God's omnipotence is the power to let blacks stand out from whiteness and to be."¹²

As much as I admire Cone, this explanation was and is not enough for me. That's all this great God is going to give? The power to stand out from whiteness and oppression? This is not enough justice for anyone who has been tortured or murdered.

When I was in Divinity School I took a whole class on theodicy, which is the ultimate "reason" test of God. The speaker who swayed me the most was a Jewish man who came to speak about the Holocaust. He used the story from (I believe it's Elie Weisel) that a group of concentration camp prisoners were forced outside to watch the hanging of one of their friends. As they stood helpless in the cold one man whispered, "Where is God." A man behind him replied "He is up there with him on the rope." Our speaker finished by saying, "God suffers with us." Again God is in relationship/dialogue with humans, but here God is not all-powerful.

Reason has led me to believe that God is not all-powerful. I know this is not enough for some people. But I can only believe in a God who does not cause, but witnesses and hurts with us during our greatest pain, otherwise there is no justice and not enough love, and speaking for myself, that is not a God I know or follow. Annie Lamott writes "God isn't there to take away our suffering or our pain but to fill it with his or her presence"¹³

I wish God had the power to make all of us act and live for good. But I just don't believe it because our world includes both good and evil, suffering and joy. My image of God is accountable, and an all-powerful, accountable God would not let the world stand aside while Rwanda, Congo, Uganda, Burundi, and now the Sudan create genocide comparable to the Holocaust. God is powerful, but not all-powerful. As I see it, the only murderers are humans, you and I. The choices for good and evil, suffering and salvation, are in our hands, in this lifetime, in this world. God calls us to goodness, but God cannot keep us from evil. Only we have the power to choose. In this way I am very much a humanist.

After the service there will be a post-service dialogue at 11:45 for anyone who wants to share his or her thoughts about God. Some people don't need God, and for others God is the power of life. As humans we will do many things in our lives. Most of us will work; some of us will choose a partner. We will watch our loved ones die and welcome new strangers to this world. All of us will need to acquaint ourselves with the depths of life, love, death, birth, beauty, suffering, family, betrayal, sacrifice. What will be our language of reverence, whatever our

¹² Cone, 93.

¹³ Lamott, 241

theology, to make meaning of these depths? For some of us a language of God is the answer to a language of reverence. As Unitarian Universalists we know this is but one path, and that we walk together with many people who will find a different path. May we all find languages of reverence to enjoy the richness of the depths.