



## **What is Theism?**

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When UUA President and former 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. 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. Lamott's words ring true for many of us here today. Certainly Reverend Sinkford's story tells of his varied journey of faith that has included humanism and a search for reverence.

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.<sup>5</sup>

This God did not appear in our children's story this morning.

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, as do I. 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.

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 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, though likely answerable, 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, who died just this past year, 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. I am also a monotheist (belief in one god) who loves the polytheism (belief in many gods) of Hinduism.

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.<sup>7</sup>  
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 "Lord," other phrases came into usage "Creator", "Redeemer", "Sustainer".<sup>8</sup> 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."

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.*"

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.<sup>11</sup>

Cone's theology evolved as he entered dialogue with other theologians. There is a robust debate in theology that often shifts theologies over time.

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."

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"

I wish God had the power to make all of us act and live for good. But I just don't believe this 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 and 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.

Some people don't need or want 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 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 listen to all the languages of reverence and enjoy the richness of the depths.