

WHAT DO I MEAN WHEN I SAY “GOD”?
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In the midst of war, and a major financial crisis, and a high-stakes presidential campaign, why speak of God? That’s the question I was asking myself Friday night, after the Presidential debates. For the preacher, there’s always that tension between the topical and the timeless. Political commentary in a worship service is hazardous - and I’m not just talking about the IRS and tax exemptions.

A minister doesn’t want to imply that her position, or the position of a particular party, is the only correct one – or worse, that it’s indistinguishable from the word of God. We’ve seen more than enough of *that* in recent years! Neither does she want to become a pale imitation of, say, *NPR* or the *New York Times*, especially when she knows that her congregation is well versed in these.

On the other hand, the preacher does not particularly want to be compared with those Russian Orthodox priests in 1917 - who, with the Russian Revolution raging outside their walls, were holed up arguing about the colors of liturgical vestments. Clearly, we must find an intersection between the timeless and the topical, the spiritual and the political. As UU ethicist James Luther Adams was fond of saying, “a purely spiritual religion is a purely spurious religion.”

I had chosen “God” as my topic for this Sunday for several reasons. One, we’re on the eve of the Jewish High Holy Days. Two, I was looking ahead to the October 9 Book Group consideration of the “New Atheists,” using Chris Hedges’ book, *I Don’t Believe in Atheists*, as a springboard. Three, I’ve sensed some tension in the congregation about what some UUs call “the G Word,” and I thought it might be helpful to open up a conversation about it.

I’m going to go ahead with my original plan. But please note: I *will* be talking about the election at the end of October, and about various social issues in November. I’m also mindful that there may be folks in this congregation who are being hurt by the crisis on Wall Street, and so it may be important to open up a conversation about that.

Finally, I think the conversation about God *is* relevant to the political situation in this country today. As we know, underlying the political polarization in this country is a religious polarization. Moderating voices are needed, and that’s one of the ways UU’s can make a distinctive contribution. We know from experience that congregations can encompass diverse religious perspectives – that “we need not think alike, to love alike.”

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The poet James Kavanaugh, a former Catholic priest, writes about “losing his easy God.” Anyone who has taken the course “Parents as Resident Theologians” has heard his poem, which includes these lines:

I have lost my easy God – the one whose name I knew since childhood.
I knew his temper, his sullen outrage, his ritual forgiveness...
His eyes clear and piercing, too blue to understand all,
His face too unwrinkled to feel my child’s pain.

He taught me to thank him for the concern
which gave me no chance to breathe,
For the love which demanded only love in
return – and obedience.
He made pain sensible and patience possible
and the future foreseeable.
He, the mysterious, took all mystery away,
corroded my imagination,
Controlled the stars and would not let
them speak for themselves...ⁱ

How old were you, when you lost your “easy God?” I realize that some of you may never have had that experience. Some who were raised in non-religious families never had to wrestle with the question of God.

But Unitarian Universalist congregations are filled with people who’ve had to take a journey akin to that of James Kavanaugh, and this includes people from non-religious homes. Our culture is so full of “God-talk” that it’s hard to escape it. As child psychologist Ana Maria Rizzuto puts it, “No child arrives at the ‘house of God’ without his pet God under his arm.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I lost my easy God in my late teens. Actually, my God was easier than Kavanaugh’s – the benign, loving God of the Methodist church, rather than the controlling one of Kavanaugh’s upbringing. In retrospect, our Methodist church practiced a kind of “Unitarianism of the second person” – almost all the focus was on Jesus. God was a shadowy figure in the background.

Nevertheless, when I lost this God, I became as angry and bitter as Kavanaugh. It was the kind of teenage rebellion that was standard for the period. I was angry at the adults in my life, whom I felt had “lied” to me about religion. I was angry at some of the people in my church, whom I perceived as self-righteous and hypocritical. And although I had stopped believing in “him,” I think at some level I was angry at God – angry because “he” had abandoned me.

What happens when we lose our “easy God,” whatever that God may be? Do we set off in search of a more satisfying one? Or do we go around, in the poignant phrase of Salman Rushdie, “with a hole in our heart where God used to be?” If there is a God-sized hole in our heart, do we seek to fill it with other things – making something else into a God? Or do we construct a worldview in which the concept of God is superfluous?

The latter course kept me going for years. When I went off to university, a plethora of non-theistic worldviews competed for my attention. Marx said that religion was the “opiate of the people.” Freud called it a childlike attempt at wish-fulfillment, to be outgrown in adulthood. Existentialists held that God was dead, and that humankind was condemned to be free. And analytic philosophers taught that to speak of anything that couldn’t be quantified was to speak nonsense. Each of these, in turn, knocked away whatever vestiges of religion I may have been clinging to. And when I finally came back to church as a 30-year-old, to the Arlington Street Church in Boston, it was as a non-theistic humanist.

That might have been the end of it. After all, there are many people within Unitarian Universalism, and in this congregation, who have made humanism a life-long faith. Generally speaking, these peoples’ lives are rich and full, marked by integrity and purpose. I can’t think of a single reason why humanists should stray from their chosen path. The only reason I did was that, much to my surprise, my faith journey took a different turn. It began over 25 years ago, with a powerful series of religious experiences that forced me to rethink the way I see the universe.

But interestingly, I doubt these experiences would have been possible in any context but liberal religion. Alan Jones, dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, writes of the “desert way of belief,” where we take nothing for granted, and follow truth wherever it seems to be leading us. It was only “in the desert,” figuratively speaking, that I could have discovered a different path. It was only with the props taken away, and the idols knocked off the shelf, that I could have an experience of the heart of life, the Living God.

But what do I mean when I say “God?” First of all, I find myself saying it less and less. Orthodox Jews are on to something, I think, when they refuse to utter, or even to write, the divine name. Some years ago, the head of the UU Christian Fellowship chided Unitarian Universalists for their reluctance to speak of “God.” But that reluctance has a long, honorable past.

To attempt to speak of God is to take something finite and limited – words – to approach the infinite and limitless. As it is written in the *Tao te Ching*, “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.” For “the unnamable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things.”ⁱⁱⁱ To speak of our faith with others, we’re forced to use words and images. But it’s important to do so humbly; any words or images we use can become frozen into an idol. “God the father” is the classic example of this within Christian tradition.

If we say “this is what God is,” it helps if we also remind ourselves, “But God is *not* this.” It may also help to remember that ultimately the only approach is silence. Simone Weil, the 20th century French mystic, maintained that there are two forms of atheism, and one is a refinement of the concept of God. In a society where God-talk comes a bit too easily, the self-declared “atheist” may be the one who takes God more seriously than anyone else.

But again: what do I mean when I say “God”? In good UU fashion, I’ll start with what I *don’t* mean. That seems necessary, given all the baggage that’s accumulated around this three-letter word.

One of the things I don’t mean is “Supreme Being” – perhaps the most common definition of “God” in our culture. To call God a Supreme Being is to make what philosophers might call a “category mistake.” It’s to imply that the divine is just one more thing, albeit an elevated one. But if I make any sense of God at all, it’s as what Tillich called the “ground of being,” embracing all that is. As Emerson said in his great essay *Nature*, “I am part and particle of God.”

Another word often used in connection with God is “supernatural,” but this is also not what I mean when I say “God.” Whatever the divine may be, he does not contravene the laws of nature; she does not pull strings. The idea of a two-story universe, with “spirit” above and “matter” below, has gotten human beings into a lot of trouble. Spirit and matter, I believe, are not separate but inextricably linked.

In a similar vein, I cannot accept a God who contravenes reason – unless “reason” requires the assumption that the only reality is what can be measured and quantified. One of our UU principles is “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Although sometimes we may have to surrender to mystery, this doesn’t mean succumbing to irrationality. It’s been said that Unitarian Universalism is both rational *and* mystical. The “free and responsible search” entails making sense of our experience, and attempting to reconcile it with what we already know.

And ultimately, for me, the key is experience. As I say in my ministerial record sheet, posted with the UUA, “my theology is, at heart, experiential.” In our society, people often ask one another, “Do you believe in God?” But for me, that question no longer makes much sense. “Belief” too often implies subscribing to dogmas, or abstract principles – and taking someone else’s word for it. But UU tradition leads us away from second hand religion, and invites us to have what Emerson called “an original relation to the universe.”

I don’t “believe” in God. Rather, something or someone has touched me, and has proven reliable over time. I’ve experienced it as a still, small voice inside - sometimes comforting, sometimes challenging, sometimes calling me to new experience. I’ve experienced it as a presence, hovering near me as I prepared for a memorial service. It’s been a light, making the world radiant, and all the people in it. It’s come to me as warmth, assuring me of love when I felt bereft. And it’s come as grace, the turning of the dawn, when all seemed lost.

What helps me trust these experiences is that others have confirmed them – friends and colleagues, as well as women and men through the ages. But let me be clear: I don’t think the experiences “prove” that God “exists.” Proofs of God’s existence have consistently fallen short. And in any event, I don’t think that proof is the point.

I’m not sure we can ever know much *about* God, spoken in the third person. The key, rather, is relationship – God in the second person. It’s not knowing *about* God as an “it,” but rather

knowing God as Thou. It's trusting the relationship, entering into it, and seeing what fruit it bears. If it's indeed trustworthy, then it will open us up, to be more free, more clear, and more loving.

In the words of Mohandas Gandhi, "He is no God who merely satisfies the intellect, if he ever does. God, to be god, must rule the heart and transform it. God is proved, not by extraneous evidence, but in the transformed conduct and character of those who have felt the real presence of God within."

But, as James Kavanaugh writes,

Perhaps I have no God – what does it matter?
 I have beauty and joy and transcending loneliness,
 I have the beginning of love – as beautiful as it
 is feeble – as free as it is human.
 I have the mountains that whisper secrets
 held before [mortals] could speak,
 I have the ocean that belches life on
 the beach and caresses it in the sand,
 I have a friend who smiles when he sees me,
 who weeps when he hears my pain,
 I have a future of wonder...

[M]y easy God is gone – and in his stead
 The mystery of loneliness and love!^{iv}

ⁱ Kavanaugh, "My Easy God is Gone", from *There are Men too Gentle to Live Among Wolves* (Kalamazoo: Steven J. Nash, 1991).

ⁱⁱ Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: a Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Tao te Ching*, Stephen Mitchell translation (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 1.

^{iv} Kavanaugh, "My Easy God is Gone."