

What Do We Do with God

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“God is One” was the cry of the Transylvanian Unitarians. Thousands of years previous, it was the Jewish people in the Middle East, who had said essentially the same thing. In fact, a number of Unitarians were persecuted because their faith was confused with Judaism. It is an irony then, that, a group known as Unitarians, a theological stance which emphasizes the unity of God, have become so skittish about God.

For hundreds of years we UU’s were content to define God differently than our neighbors. That is, in fact what theology is about: defining what you mean by god. Then, sometime in the 20th century, a lot of Unitarians and Universalists decided that rather than defining God in our own way we would stop using the word God altogether. Should we throw out words because of the way someone else uses it? As a poet once put it: I don’t stop using the alphabet just because of what someone scribbles on the bathroom wall! If the question is asked that way, probably most of us would answer no. We would probably say that we will just choose to use language in a different way.

The more difficult question is whether the repeated use of language in a particular context means that certain words have so irrevocably changed their meaning that they cannot be reclaimed. Has the misuse of God made it impossible for you to use that word anymore? In the story of Moses, God refuses to give a name. Instead when asked God says “I am who I am.” Nameless.

So, the Unitarian reluctance to lightly use the word God or to assume a definition that is shared, has a long, long tradition. Perhaps the word is so misused it is best to give it up?

In considering this question, the first thing to remember about religion and religious language, is that it has always been multi-layered and metaphorical, at least for those who were deeply involved in the world of faith and spirit. It also has always been taken literally, by those with a literal mind. Think of the story of Moses, how the people following him had difficulty with the unseen God who had no name nor any visual image, so they made themselves a golden calf.

That ancient story tells the problem of the masses wanting to have a concrete image, something one can touch and see, rather than having a God who is not concrete, a nameless god, who is only approachable in metaphor and in the evidence of God's presence in the world around us. Even when concrete images of God were used, images such as a Golden calf, or Pallas Athena, or Thor, or Vishnu, for many in those societies, the images were not literal, but rather were metaphors for aspects of the various divine forces that move through the world. An interesting tidbit I heard recently was that *Yahweh*, the Hebrew word used for God might credibly be translated: Yahoo! An exclamation of celebration.

Among modern 21st century Westerners, the same religious tendencies exist. There are those who are very concrete and literalistic in their approach to God and there are a great many others, in all faith traditions whether it be Catholics, Protestants, Jews, or Muslims, who have a poetical or a metaphorical God--a God that words and images can suggest. To say that we are being metaphorical, is not to deny the reality of God, but

rather to say that *what* we mean when we say “God” is something that cannot adequately be described nor understood using concrete, materialistic, language. As the Buddhist master said: “Truth can be likened to the bright moon in the sky. Words, in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point to the moon's location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger.”

Many a Unitarian Universalist has told me that they have no use for God because they do not believe in the old, white guy, with a beard, who lives in the sky. That God is a childhood God. I don't personally know any adult who admits to believing that God looks a lot like George Burns or maybe like Santa Claus. Children are very concrete and tend to have concrete images, even if they have not necessarily been taught them.

I remember that when, as a child, I heard from a relative that God was everywhere, I began carrying around in my head the image in one of my kid's books of this very fat, jolly, clown who filled the whole page and whose polka-dotted suit seemed to flow out beyond the page. I imagined this clown as invisibly filling all the spaces with his gay polka-dots, so that he was everywhere. That was my five-year-old way of thinking about God being everywhere. Of course, as I grew older, I rejected that image. I would be surprised if anyone in this room still keeps the God of their childhood. My Colleague, Forrester Church says about atheism and definitions of god: “Tell me what god you don't believe in and chances are I don't believe in him either.” In other words, God, like an unsolved value in an algebraic equation, is a word that stands for some overarching reality that we celebrate and trust, whatever it might be.

So the question for adult UU's is not whether we believe in the concrete, anthropomorphic, images of childhood, but whether we trust in something transcendent and imminent which can only be talked of metaphorically, but which we might call God. A subsidiary question is if we don't call it God, because of all our baggage, what do we call it?

Many UU's use the word God in a naturalistic way. Most UU's, in fact, have a sense of reverence and awe in powerful natural settings: walking amongst the trees in the great forests, contemplating alone at the beach the mighty force of the ocean and the teeming life within it, climbing a mountain and seeing the earth from a new vantage point, or contemplating the vastness of the universe beyond. It is there, in nature, that we most often report a feeling of being at one with everything. It is there that so many of us feel in touch with a force and a power greater than we can imagine--something that we might call God. Many of the scientists I have known, who started as young men or women thinking they could measure and understand everything and who had no room in their intellectual world for something that did not fit into definable categories, found, as middle age approached, that there was more complexity and mystery within the natural universe than they had ever dreamt of in their philosophies. It changes their spiritual relationship to their work and their world, whether or not they choose to call that transcendent reality God.

For other UU's, God is in something closer to home: in the everyday beauty of flowers in bloom, in the quickening life in a mother's womb, in the unexpected kindness of a stranger, or the deep sharing that sometimes occurs, unexpectedly, as two people share something of their souls. This is not the holiness of great powers of nature and the

universe, but the fragile, often missed holiness in everyday things. This is the God that some seek in spiritual practices of mindfulness or of meditation. This is the God that Martin Buber spoke of when he talked of the I and the Thou. He spoke of the moments when we stop seeing what is around us as things or objects, and instead experience their essence, especially when this happens between two people. The moment you and I stop seeing each other as means to our ends and instead appreciate the Other for who they really are.

Some UU's describe God in intellectual or theological terms. Several people I know describe God like Paul Tillich did: God is their "Ultimate Concern." Meaning that for them, God is the answer to the questions that being alive poses; the answer to questions such as: "Why am I here?" and "What is my life about?"

God is whatever is your best answer to those questions. Or God is in existence itself. God is described in terms such as justice, love, and holiness--not that God is those things, but God has those things and that which is holy and just, points to the Ultimate Concerns of human life. There are a lot of possibilities that theologians and lay people have come up with.

At one time I described God as the absolutes that we as humans seek to approach but can never fulfill: absolute love, absolute justice, absolute beauty, absolute truth, absolute generosity.

Several theologians talked about God as a process--as a verb rather than a noun. Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman spoke about God as the process of creation or the creative interchange that occurs when two forces come together to create something that is more than both of them. Thus, for Wieman, God was the creative power

that made the universe, the planets, animals, and humans. God was the creative power that happens when we get together and create something beyond ourselves. For Wieman, God was the Supreme Good that emerged whenever a creative event brought forth in the human mind, in society and history, or in the world a new sense of interrelatedness. God is in our emerging, integrating, expanding, and deepening. For Wieman, the human vocation is to serve that creative good which is God.

Theologian, Richard Niehbuhr, believed that God is being itself; that God is everything that was, is, and ever shall be.

Others try to approach God not through the philosophical or theological, but rather through the metaphorical and poetry. I read Bible stories--not as historical stories, but as mythic poetry in the sense in which Joseph Campbell describes myth. Bible stories are the attempts of various people throughout history to reflect on the nature of God and God's relationship to the human endeavor. Because the collection of books in scripture is so eclectic, the nature of God is quite different from one story to the next. In some stories God is very close, in others quite remote. In some stories God is loving, in others harsh and judgmental. In some stories God speaks clearly and simply, in others God is incomprehensible and mysterious. In some God is portrayed as embodying virtue beyond the human, in others as a petty, jealous, tyrant.

The God of Adam is quite different than the God of Abraham. The God of Abraham is different than the God of Moses. There are two different images of God in Job, one in the borrowed legend, and quite another in the whirlwind. The God of the Psalms is different still. The God in the Gospels is different than in the Hebrew Testament. This is, perhaps, why even among people who search for God in the Torah or

the Bible, the images of God vary so widely from the stern God of the Puritans to the Loving God of the Universalists. The Christian UU's among us prefer these Biblical metaphors to describe their experience of God, but even among UU Christians the sources are quite different. There were so many different people writing the Bible and the images in it so contradictory that there is no unified picture of God in scriptures. Indeed within the same book there are often two different authors with two different ideas about God. The book of Job is a good example. Part of the book is an old folktale with a simplistic view of a rather petty, power hungry God. Another part is an author writing of mystery, majesty, and the unknowable.

A particularly strong and powerful change in our use of metaphor in Unitarian Universalism is among the increasing number of people who feel very strongly the importance of describing God in feminine imagery and using feminine words. God becomes the Goddess and almost immediately begins to acquire aspects associated with the feminine: fecundity, intimacy, nurturing, beauty. Many women whose past experience with masculine images of God made them feel as if God were remote and other, find that with the Goddess they experience themselves as an intimate part of the divine as she manifests herself in the world. Interestingly, Biblical scholars point out that there is quite a bit of feminine imagery in the Bible that goes unnoticed or was not well-translated. For example, there are many instances in the Hebrew Scriptures where God is referred to as “womb-like.”

One of the issues I have when it comes to God is that the God I try to describe in rational or intellectual terms, the God I might say I believe in my mind, is not the same as

the God I actually experience in my life. And yet again the God I say I believe in, may not be quite the same as the God I act as if I believe in.

Although we don't talk a great deal about them, many of us have had religious experiences. Even many among us who would describe ourselves as agnostic, might still have had some profound experience of being at one with nature, an experience which, through the ages has been called a mystical experience. But these experiences, powerful as they may be, or perhaps because they are so intimate and profound, are difficult to integrate into our drier, more rationalistic approaches to God.

What do I do when God is no longer some dry theological phrase, such as Ground of Being, and instead becomes a felt reality, a presence, (at least momentarily) in my life? It confirms, of course, how inarticulate our attempts are to describe or understand whatever it is we mean when we say the word God, how we are only vaguely pointing in a direction, but are struck dumb when it comes to true speech.

For me, it is the actual experience of God that makes me want to use metaphors to talk about and with God. It is not that I think of God as a being, but I have no other metaphor for communication than to use words like You when addressing my experience of something other than myself. I need a noun for this transcendent, imminent, powerful, holy otherness, even though a word like God seems inadequate.

I have always thought that the question of whether a person believes in the existence of God, a meaningless one. If a person says that they believe in God, we know no more about them than we did before. The important question is: What is the nature of your God and how does that affect the way you live life? God is not a proposition to be believed in or not. God is the X in an equation that each person is trying to solve and that

we will solve in many different ways. Some solutions lead to bad actions--people hurt, oppress and kill each other in the name of some evil notion of God. Many solutions are good solutions which help us to be better human beings which help us to be good to one another and stand up for one another and our world. The test of our theology is our life.

When I say that I believe in someone, it means not that I believe they exist, but that I trust them, I trust the power and influence they have on me and others. So a real relationship with God would be one in which we trusted ourselves and our lives to God and tried to live so as to be trustworthy ourselves. So it is not the God we say we believe in, but the one that we actually allow ourselves to be guided by and trust our lives to, that matters. Thus when we say that someone's God is money, material goods, power, or status, we are saying that they have entrusted their lives to the pursuit of these things. This was the kind of thing that was meant when theologians talk of worshipping false idols. It is when someone lives his or her life as if these lesser things --- money, power, hedonism, were of ultimate importance, as if in them could be found the meaning of life.

I believe that religion is about the search for what we will trust and devote our lives to. Not the search for the existence of God, but the search for what we will trust our lives to. We may name that God, but many who never choose to use the word, find a way to live their lives as if they had entrusted them to some ultimate and trustworthy source of meaning, while others who use the word all the time don't trust their lives to God at all.

Unitarian Universalism is about finding that ultimate force worth trusting, whatever we may choose to name it, and then acting in life in a way that will bless the world.