

Reflections on the Word "God"
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If one of the purposes of hearing a talk at the fellowship is to inspire thinking, I will have to say that Amy's talk last year on the subject of "reclaiming God" did that for me. On the one hand I was pleased to be reminded that the word "God" does not belong to any one religious entity. And yet I continue to hesitate using the word myself and I have been asking myself why? My talk today describes my exploration of my feelings about this potent word. I will also cover some of the broad range of beliefs regarding God, beginning with the Bible and particularly from a UU perspective.

I can think of no other word that carries as much power as the word "God." It has inspired some of the world's greatest literature, architecture, music, and art. It has served as the foundation of many civilizations and societies. It has been the cause of horrible wars and political conflicts. More people throughout history have devoted their lives to it than to anything else. Clearly I don't expect to eradicate it and I don't want to discourage those of you who continue to find the word meaningful as many UU's do.

I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish household and I attended a religious elementary and high school. My father, teachers and rabbis taught me to believe in a personal God who observed everything I did and knew all my thoughts. This God rewarded those who followed His commandments, of which there were many, and punished those who transgressed. The transgressors would expect to burn in hell and the righteous to spend eternity in heaven. When I reached the age of 17 it became impossible for me to believe in such a God for many reasons. But leaving the Jewish faith was one of the hardest things I ever did because it caused a rift with my family and community of origin. Since that time my views about the divine have evolved as I have sought to find alternatives to foster my spiritual growth.

"God" is a word that means so many things to so many different people and faith traditions. In my childhood, God was near and involved in everything; for others God is remote and not engaged in world activities. For some God is the source of good and evil; for others God is the source of good only. For some God is a personal being and for others God is an abstract principle such as love or justice. For some God metes out rewards and punishments and for others God makes no judgments. For the Baha'i, God is the same in all religions and for fundamentalists God is quite specific, precisely defined and exclusive. For some, God is part of nature; for others God is "supernatural."

Given the multitude of ideas about God, I propose the following two assumptions: First, the concept of God is a human invention. The book by William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is relevant here. James notes that Christian mystics have Christian visions; Moslems have Moslems visions, and so on. So we experience God according to our own culture, upbringing, and beliefs. Second assumption: belief in God is a matter of faith and not fact. The existence of God has never been proven philosophically. You can see why I am an agnostic. I don't like to refer to an entity that I can't prove to exist or

what form it may have. I am often unsure when others use this word what exactly they mean by it. Any idea I might have about the other person's meaning is likely to be mistaken. And the same is true if I use the word; I do not expect others will know what I mean unless I explain.

Some of you are familiar with the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. The story, from the Old Testament book of Genesis, begins with the desire of humans to build a tower to heaven: "And they said ... let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children built. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do." In response the Lord had them all speaking different languages so they could not understand one another and could not continue building this tower to heaven. To me this story is an allegory, at least in part, about the arrogance and futility of any attempt on the part of human beings to come to a unified understanding of God and possibly require all to follow. And the "punishment" for this shared hubris was to have the builders be scattered to the ends of the earth speaking different languages and not able to communicate with each other, and thus could not achieve their purpose. I think a second possible moral of this odd story is that if we are to live in peace we must accept that different peoples must learn to get along with alternative beliefs and not try to impose some overarching understanding of God that all must accept. There will never be a mutually agreed upon understanding of God in this diverse world. The book by Stephen Prothero entitled *God is Not One* makes a similar point. I also mentioned in the talk I gave in 2009 on the religions of the Axial Age, roughly 2,500 years ago, that the religious leaders of the time in India, China, Israel and Greece all agreed that focus on defining God or gods was not especially useful, but focus on ethics was.

Many students of the Old Testament have pointed out the nature and character of God changes over time as the text unfolds. The God of Adam and Eve is punishing and apparently jealous. He doesn't want to share the "knowledge of good and evil" with the Eden dwellers. Noah's God destroys most of the human race, except for Noah and his family, because they do not live righteously. After the flood, God enters into a covenant with Noah that he will never destroy the whole human race again. God responds to Abraham's request that he would spare the sinful cities of Sodom and Gemora if only 10 righteous people dwelled within. God is now seen as embodying justice and in partnership with faithful humans. Later in the Bible, when Moses hears a voice calling to him from the burning bush asking him to speak to the Pharaoh on behalf of the Israelite slaves, Moses asks, "Who shall I say sent me?" The reply he receives is "I will be that which I will be." In other words, the God of Moses has no name. Erich Fromm expressed the view that by this time in the development of Judaism, God ceased to be a being and became an abstract principle, a synonym for "Love," "Justice," "Truth" and other virtues. The point I want to make from this cursory review of the early part of the Bible, is that what is meant by God changes dramatically. And that is just one book! Obviously, God is not changing; rather, peoples' ideas about the concept of God is evolving.

The Unitarian side of our heritage emerged in reaction to the “Trinitarian” view of God. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity defines God as three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, distinctly coexisting in unity as co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial, or of one being. The Trinity itself is considered to be a mystery of Christian faith. Whatever attributes and power God the Father has, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have as well. Since the middle ages Unitarians, in contrast to nearly all other Christians, rejected the Trinity. Unitarians reasoned simply that three does not equal one. We UU’s have been in the business of questioning orthodoxy for hundreds of years, using rational thinking to explore our understanding of God and other matters of theology.

William Ellery Channing was among most important early figures in American Unitarianism. He believed in and preached about a fatherly and loving God, in contrast to the Calvinist view. Channing taught that Jesus was a mediator who interpreted God’s will to humanity but was not himself God. For Channing, the goal of a religious life was to strive towards a returned intimacy with God. God was seen as above humanity and beyond nature. God was not part of natural laws but He created the universe. God could perform miracles because He could suspend the laws of nature. In spite of being beyond the world, God’s presence could be felt in the world through orderliness, miracles, and through the teachings of Jesus.

Hosea Ballou, the father of American Universalism, maintained that as finite creatures, human beings are incapable of offending an infinite God. Therefore, he rejected the orthodox argument that the death of Jesus was designed to appease an angry God for the sins of humankind. Ballou replaced it with the idea that God is a being of eternal love who seeks the happiness of his human children. The name Universalism stands for the idea that salvation is universal. Ballou did not believe that hell existed.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was an ordained Unitarian minister who left the church to found Transcendentalism. Although Transcendentalism is considered a spiritual movement rather than a religion, UUs still love to claim him as our own. In his essay “The Over-Soul,” Emerson gave one of his most concise expressions of his belief. Emerson did not believe in a personal God: “...within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal One. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul.”

Next, I’ll share some contemporary liberal religious views about God, revealing a broad range of concepts of God within our UU tradition.

Many UU’s adhere to “process theology.” Last year Roger read a sermon by the Rev. Susan Maginn representing this viewpoint. To quote from that sermon, “Process

theology affirms how God is in process, God is a force that is ever-present, that evolves, grows, mourns, and even suffers losses....God is love, all acts of love are acts of God....” Maginn explained that she came to call this force God because she realized that her acts of love could not originate in her ego but instead from a much larger source.

Professor Sharon Welch is provost at Meadville Lombard Theological School, a UU seminary. Early in her academic career, she “ditched the word God” in favor of “the divine.” Given how often evil wins the day, Welch reasoned, claims about God’s goodness are “untenable.” In her view, the traditional God is “irrational and unworthy of worship.”

Some UU’s reject the notion of God **or** the divine altogether and some have an atheistic view of the universe. On the UUA website there is an article by Rev. Paul Raiser outlining the broad spectrum of belief in our faith. Few UU’s believe in a supernatural God who rewards and punishes. Instead many, like Rev. Maginn, understand themselves to be in a relationship with a God who they believe to be a creative power in the universe, a source of personal transformation, or the ongoing power of love, or the ultimate mystery of life.

Here are some more examples provided by the website article:

Rev. Scotty McLennan says, “By the time I was in my twenties God had become an impersonal force or energy in the universe.” He quotes Wadsworth’s description as coming close to his view: “A sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of the setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man: a motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things.” This is much like Emerson.

Another UU, Rev. Katy Huff believes that “life is woven together by invisible threads of being, that the earth and all that lies beyond it emanate not from one source but from a complex web of existence and energy that spans time and space.” She goes on to say that while she believes, “there are conscious connections and interdependent relationships within this great web of existence I do not use the word God or Goddess to describe it.” Also she does not believe morality is imposed from an external source in the universe but rather from her own sense of responsibility. This personal sense of responsibility and connection keeps her engaged in justice work

Rev. Lisa Schwartz states, “The core of my Unitarian Universalism is that no theology is universal.” In other words there are many variant beliefs about God. She experiences what she calls “God” on “several different planes simultaneously; as transcendence, mysterious other; as the life force and inspiration within ourselves; and in faces of other people....”

Anthony Pinn, professor of religious studies, states, “It has been years since I have used the word “God” to explain anything about the world in which we live. The issue of evil and suffering prevents me from finding any comfort in this term.” As an African-

American, Professor Pinn finds that belief in God is counterproductive to fighting racial injustice. He concludes, “Mine is a firm atheism that avoids talk of transcendence. From my perspective, there is nothing behind the symbol “God”. In its place, I affirm the idea of community.” Professor Pinn believes that it is through community that we are able to overcome oppression and develop our full human potential.

Rev. Erik Walker Wilkstrom says that his belief as an adult evolved into “an impersonal God, a force like gravity, or love, or life itself....Yet what was missing from this understanding of God for me was the quality of relationship, the actual experience of a relationship with God....I now believe in a personal God who is not a person; who is a Mystery beyond my ability to comprehend, yet no less real for my confusion. This God is wholly Other, yet also ‘as close as my own breath.’ St Augustine wrote, ‘If you can understand it, it is not God.’ I can not say what God is, though I know in my soul that God is. God is known by many names, yet is not fully known by any name.”

Finally, here are some words from the late Rev. Forrest Church, a very prominent UU until his death last year. “God is that which is greater than all and yet present in each. When that which is present in you relates to that which is present in all, you are sustained.... I began by believing in a kind of rational God....I was closer to a Jeffersonian Unitarian than I was to an Emersonian Unitarian....Over time, partly through crises in my own life...God moved from my head to my heart....’God’ is not God’s name. ‘God’ is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each....”

This brief sampling of UU leaders past and present begins to hint at the range of views about the existence or meaning of God. As for names, here is a partial list: El, Elohim, Shaddi, Adoni, Jahova, En Sof, Allah, Jesus, Father, Holy Ghost, Gaia, Mother Goddess, Isis, Aphrodite, Zeus, Coyote, Great Spirit, Brahman, Atman, Tao, Indra, Ahura Mazda.

So have I confused you about the meaning of the word “God”? We are UU’s in part because there is no consensus among us about God. There is no “single lens” for us although we find roots for our individual beliefs in our liberal tradition. We are free to responsibly search for the sense of meaning that works for us whether or not we use the word “God.”

In place of the word “God” I prefer Paul Tillich’s term, “ultimate concern.” One reason for this preference is that it focuses upon individual human beliefs and values rather than an entity that can not be proven to exist. Ultimate concern is about our human response to the eternal questions. Instead of being indoctrinated with a dogmatic concept of a deity, which we are told we must accept or face damnation, Tillich makes it clear that each of us has to determine for ourselves what we value most and what we want to focus our lives on. Another advantage to Tillich’s term for me is that it includes what we do as much as what we proclaim. For example, a person might claim to be a Christian but rarely if ever engage in acts of charity so that person’s ultimate concern might be amassing a large amount of money for oneself rather than love for others. Ultimate

concern can be a useful tool to clarify our values and spiritual practice. I find myself asking, “Am I living up to what concerns me ultimately?”

As UU’s we can disagree about God and other matters and yet respect and support one another’s search. UUA President Peter Morales is right in saying that we need a religion that goes “beyond belief.” I think choosing among alternative beliefs about God is a private decision. When I focus on what concerns me ultimately in addition to my family, friends, this fellowship, and my clients, what I think of is the suffering in the world. I think of the people of Somalia who are starving and living in terror. I think about the ever increasing number of Americans who don’t have employment, food, or shelter. I think about the fate of our world as global warming continues unabated. I think about the people of Syria being slaughtered for expressing their political wishes. I want to do something to help relieve suffering and prevent greater harm. Like many UUs, I am comfortable with the diversity of opinion about who and what God is, and find more challenge and utility in the question: “Does your belief in something positive that is greater than you, whatever it may be, inspire you to ethical action?” The prophet Micah said, “Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly.” So tell me, what is your ultimate concern and what are you doing about it?