

“God Revised;” A Twenty-First Century View  
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March 2, 2015

I don't think there is a topic more potentially divisive for UU's than "God." So it is with some trepidation that I introduce this as our theme for the month of March. Historically as most of you are aware, Unitarians and Universalists both challenged the idea of the Trinity and regarded Jesus as a model for ethical living but not "God." In the early twentieth century many Unitarians abandoned God language in favor of humanism. The Unitarian theists at the time warned that our movement would lose membership over this, and that proved to be true. The pendulum began to swing back towards theism in the late twentieth century, to the dismay of the humanist faction. The trend now seems to be, as Amy shared with us a couple of years ago, to reclaim a broader view of God than is offered by our Trinitarian Christian counterparts. During this month we'll be exploring some of these broader views. I am hoping for all of us, theist, deist, agnostic, atheist, pantheist, Wiccan, New Age spiritualist, or whatever, that these talks will be an opportunity to reexamine the concept of God and hopefully lead to new and more meaningful understandings. I hope as well, as Rev. Kendyl Gibbons stated, no one retains the child's picture of the bearded old man in the sky keeping score.

Last May when my nephew was marrying, I attended a synagogue service and I was reminded why I had to leave Orthodox Judaism. In his sermon, the rabbi, who declared himself as "modern," stated that a Jew must practice the faith without understanding why. This I cannot do. I am in the camp that believes religion has to make sense. This is especially true for me regarding God. I can't just take on faith notions about God that don't stand up to reason and scientific knowledge.

I took the title of my talk and much of its content from the book by Rev. Galen Guengerich of New York's Unitarian Church of All Souls. Guengerich was raised in the Mennonite faith and had planned to become a Mennonite minister. That changed when his cousin died of brain cancer. This book is the result of Guengerich's search of a God that made sense, based on his knowledge of theology and science. The book spoke to my twin needs to have a theology that doesn't ask me to suspend logic and reason, and also that speaks to my spiritual yearning. I find it comes as close to anything I have read recently in accomplishing that. I liked the book so much I gave copies to my family and a friend.

My talk is divided into three parts: What God clearly is not, what God might be, what the latter might mean for us.

Guengerich asks how can an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving God allow tsunamis, earthquakes, famines, epidemics and other catastrophes that

indiscriminately kill thousands of innocent people? How can a loving God let a beautiful child die of brain cancer? If God can “heal the sick and raise the dead,” how can he permit such horrible events? While it would be tempting to believe in a God that watched over all of us and that answered prayers, what proof is there for that? How many prayers are not answered?

So if one rejects the idea of a God who intervenes outside of natural causes, and on a personal basis into human affairs, what is left? Our choice appears to be to believe in the laws of nature or that a power greater than nature intervenes at times in the world in response to prayers. We can't have it both ways. Did I miss going over the side rail sliding on the ice because God was watching over me or was it random luck? If God spared me why didn't he spare other people?

For at least several thousand years and probably for much longer, humans were convinced there was a power that did intervene in human affairs overcoming natural events. The Mayans for example, engaged in human sacrifice to appease the gods to assure rain and good harvests.

William E. Channing is considered by many to be a founding father of the Unitarian tradition in the USA. Back in the early 1800's he preached that religion had to stand up to reason, and therefore he maintained that the miracles of the Bible were not to be taken literally. He also preached that Jesus, while a great religious leader, was not himself God. That is what made Channing a Unitarian. There are those who continue to believe in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and is to be taken literally in all respects. The world was created in 6 days, about 6000 years ago. Jesus was conceived immaculately. He raised Lazarus from the dead. He was resurrected 3 days after he died. Really? I am amazed at how many Americans actually believe these things. According to a Gallop poll 42% of Americans believe God created humans within the last 10,000 years. A Pew research study found that 73% of Americans believe in the virgin birth.

Guengerich says we know why bad things happen to people. It is because of nature's indifference to human affairs, not because of human wickedness. If God were punishing the wicked why do good people suffer often and cruel and immoral people flourish? The God that intervenes to punish the wicked, reward the righteous, and answers prayers does not exist.

In her book, *A History of God*, religious historian Karen Armstrong stated, the declaration, “I believe in God,” had in the past, and continues to have, very different and often contradictory meanings. Nevertheless, some will say God has always had exactly the same meaning. Many students of religion, including Karen Armstrong and our own Ronn Smith, have stated that not until the scientific revolution did the idea of “God” in western civilization take on the very specific form that it now has. The rise of science in western civilization led to the concept that God could be tested scientifically in the same way that gravity, or

genetics, or atomic theory can. But we know the idea of God cannot be scientifically evaluated. And although many claim to know God, Armstrong argues that it is not possible because the word "God" refers to a transcendent entity beyond human comprehension.

To summarize, there is no supernatural God and if there is a God of some more natural kind, it is impossible for humans to know it in anything resembling a complete way or to prove its existence. It is a mistake to think otherwise.

So much for what God is not, and what cannot be known. Let's consider what might the revised understanding of "God" be.

Guengerich begins to answer this question by examining what the basic nature of reality is or in his terms, "what there is." From Alfred North Whitehead he borrows the notion that in reality the universe is composed of relationships and "sequences of energy-events." The universe is constantly in flux; never static. This contrasts the theory that the universe is composed simply of atoms or other physical building blocks. If one listed all the atoms or even the organs that made up a particular human body that would not say much about who the person was, would it? Every part of us came from somewhere else. And who each of us is as human beings stems from, and is defined by our unique experiences. All reality is composed of relationships among things and is constantly changing. What anything is, a tree, a person, a molecule, a planet, must be defined and understood in the context of other things to which each is related. Again, the universe and nature are best understood as constantly changing and defined by relationships rather than entities in isolation.

Guengerich quotes the liberal theologian Schleiermacher to the effect that religion is primarily the experience of being completely connected to nature. Religious experience both validates our unique place in the world and yet reminds us that we are "small and temporary creatures." From the view that religion is about humans' connection to nature, Guengerich defines God as a special kind of experience and not an entity. God is "the experience of being connected to all that is—all that is present as well as all that is past and all that is possible." "God" then is the ultimate interconnection. Guengerich asserts also that while God is not supernatural, belief in this "experience of God" is necessary for wellbeing. He believes this is so because humans have a deep longing for connection and a need to find meaning. The experience of God as he describes it fulfills that need.

God exists not as a physical entity like an apple, but instead like an experience such as "beauty." The experience of beauty is very real but it is not tangible. Meaning derives from this intangible experience of God. To put it a bit differently, God is our awareness of our complete and utter dependency upon forces outside of ourselves for our existence. This is so because of the fact that everything is connected to something else. God incorporates all that has happened in the

entire universe in the past, “its sufferings, its sorrows, its triumphs, its joy.” God is the context in which everything is woven together. “God is the name we give to our common awareness of a presence that bears witness to everything that happens in life.... God is the binding element of the universe.... As a source of all that is possible God provides hope even in bleak circumstances.”

To sum up, the God that Whitehead and Guengerich speak of includes everything that was, is, or will be. In contrast to the supernatural God of most religions, Guengerich and Whitehead’s God is completely a part of nature. When we feel connected to this God, as Schleiermacher states, “At this moment I am its soul, for I feel all its powers and its infinite life as my own; at that moment it is my body.” Through our experience we embody God, and we become part of God. Guengerich suggests we may find this view hard to accept because it casts us into divine beings and it imposes a responsibility to, “offer the optimism of the possible.”

Guengerich and Whitehead’s ideas are very consistent with religious naturalism, which was the Fellowship’s theme for November, as you may remember. A UU blog states as follows: “Religious naturalism ...seeks to explore and encourage religious ways of responding to the world on a completely naturalistic basis without a supreme being....”

If “God” is as Guengerich defines it is, “the experience of being connected to all that is—all that is present as well as all that is past and all that is possible,” what are the implications for human beings? This for me is the most important aspect of any consideration of “God.” Guengerich finds the answer in enlightened religion. He says the mission of religion is to make the world a better place. Religion results from “a deep-seated and long-standing human need for connection and wholeness.”

Faith is the means to practicing religion. I think most of us would agree, we should not be asked to place our faith in things that defy reason and fact. I find Guengerich’s definition of faith acceptable to my sense of reason and yet also inspiring. Faith is, “a commitment to live with the belief that life is a wondrous mystery, that love is divine, that we are responsible for the well being of others around us. Faith is a commitment to live fervently and devoutly, with eyes wide opened, mind fully engaged, with heart open to mystery, and soul attuned to the transcendent.” Would you agree that is a refreshing way to define faith? UU’s desire a rational and not dogmatic religion that points towards a positive and inspiring faith. Faith can help us become more open to transcendence. Transcendence is the experience of moving beyond every day concerns to a larger view of life and our place in it. With transcendence we are more aware of either the tragedy or the beauty of life and we feel deeply connected and more inclined to positive action. Transcendence is another word for a mystical experience, an epiphany, or a peak experience.

In response to this relational God as an experience of the totality of the universe, time, and existence, Guengerich speaks of an “ethics of gratitude.” The ethics of traditional Judaism, Christianity and Islam are grounded in obedience to a God who punishes those who fail to obey his commandments and rewards the obedient in an afterlife. Without a parental-like “supreme being” what motivates ethical behavior? Guengerich says its gratitude. We humans are totally dependent on many things for our existence, survival and well being. Enlightened ethics comes about through free will, not by fear of a punishing divine agency. Ethical behavior is our response to all that we have been given and encourages our moral responsibility to make the world a better place for others now and in the future. Whitehead saw this non-coercive ethics as humans cooperating with the creative forces of the universe to advance what is good. One way we create “good” is by creating more choices, opportunities and possibilities for others. The more options each of us has the better we are able to maximize the present for the sake of a better future. Each person’s freedom and the extent of her choices, is completely and utterly dependent on many other people and circumstances. I cannot turn on a light, buy groceries, check a website, or watch TV without a lot of other people creating the circumstances. I cannot breathe, hydrate or nourish myself without reliance on forces outside of me. Freedom, contrary to popular belief, is not based on independence but rather on reciprocity and cooperation. Our responsibility as humans is to provide sustenance and to create choices for each other. When we feel gratitude for all that we have been given we desire to make the world a better place for others. We become partners with the divine source of all sustenance in helping to create wellness for others.

A faith community encourages us to experience and express gratitude, and to work for the common good. According to Guengerich, a faith community is defined by its covenant to “...bear witness to each other’s lives...the worlds they occupy, and hope to occupy in the future.” Worship provides us opportunity to become connected with each other, with the past, and to what is possible to do together to make the world better. Worship, when it succeeds, also connects us with gratitude.

An enlightened religion attempts to unite the best of the wisdom of the past with the best contemporary knowledge to guide our ethical conduct. The value of any religion can be measured, as the late Rev. Forest Church saw it, in terms of how well it succeeds in these terms. Religion should serve to lift us out of our daily routines to a realm where we clearly see the world and our place in it. We can be moved by both tragedy and natural beauty. When we transcend everyday experience and enter a more spiritual realm we might most likely realize that we are so dependent upon sources outside of ourselves for our survival. The awareness of our utter dependency leads to feeling both awe and obligation. We become inspired to work to make the future better for all. The word religion comes from Latin and means to bind together. A healthy religion binds members of a community to a life of mutual support and to our shared

work. When religion succeeds it provides a realistic and also inspiring sense of who we really are and what our purpose in life is.

A number of years ago Ronn wrote an essay published in the Sheridan Press Pastor's Corner on gratitude for the Thanksgiving holiday. In it he claimed that the feeling of gratitude itself is actually a "gift" to oneself. He called it a "blessing," because it serves as a foundation of spiritual awareness. The Talmud teaches that contentment comes to one who is joyful with what life has bestowed. Ronn quoted Meister Eckhart who stated, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is 'thank you,' it will be enough."

Let me close with a few personal thoughts about all this. I feel strongly that I need to build my personal theology on my experiences of transcendence and connection with the natural forces of the world and the universe. I appreciate Guengerich's emphasis on this as a foundation of faith. It is also one of the six UU sources. Without direct experience of the transcendent my spiritual life would be far less meaningful to me. As I mentioned, I also appreciate Guengerich's definition of faith as having to do with living my values and being open to the transcendent. This concept of faith helps me with my strivings to become a more loving and giving person. I have long felt that gratitude is at the core of a spiritual life. It is one part of my Jewish heritage that I continue to find relevant. What I find in Guengerich book that I most value and am most excited about is seeing gratitude in this cosmic context. With gratitude I become more spiritually connected. In terms of criticism, I don't think Guengerich made a strong enough case for me that having a belief in what he terms the experience of God, even his revised form, is essential to a meaningful life. Some of you may find that you like to think of the universe, the past and the possibilities for the future to be inspiring, but you may also think that is not your idea of "God." Some of you may also wonder why such an idea about God or indeed any idea about God at all, is necessary to a meaningful and ethical life. I am wondering these things myself but I am still attracted to this revised form of God. However, personally I would not call that experience of the cosmic process "God." I prefer to think of it as the "interconnected web." I believe that our seventh UU principle, which states, "We affirm and promote respect for the interconnected web of existence of which we are a part," is all really enriched by Guengerich's book.

I would be pleased if this talk inspires you to deepen your own reflections about God or whatever alternative concept you choose. May you find greater connection and inspiration for service to others, however you do so. Finally, may we all continue to work and grow together in this stupendous journey we call life that I am truly grateful to share with you here.

May it be so.