

Let's Talk about God[s] & No-God
A sermon delivered at the Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
Thunder Bay, Ontario on Sunday, May 15, 2016

Reading #1: “A Great Gulf” The Rev. Phillip Hewitt

“It is popularly supposed that between those who use the word God and those who do not there is a great gulf. But the gulf lies elsewhere. It lies between those who dogmatize, whether positively or negatively, and those who recognize in great humility that something within them bears witness to realities which may be momentous in our lives, but which lie beyond the grasping net of our categories of thought.

Dogmatic theism and dogmatic atheism both spring from precisely the same root, a claim that there can be strict proofs when all we can in fact see are some glimpses of majestic scenery through rifts in the enveloping clouds.” Phillip Hewitt [*Wrestling*, 146]

Reading #2: “Some God-Book or Other” The Rev. Jane Rzepka

“I’m standing in line at the Registry of Motor Vehicles – a long line – to renew my license, and I’m reading some God-book or other and the guy ahead of me in line asks me if I’m a minister and I say ‘yes’ and he says, ‘Do you believe in God?’...

The truth is, there are a lot of gods out there I don’t believe in. And a few that I do believe in. So I said to the man in line, ‘I believe in big mysteries. I believe in depth of feeling – feelings so deep within the spirit that the connection, or the bliss, or the peace, stay with us forever, and I believe in a goodness created by our lives and our care.’

He said, ‘Fine.’

That was all there was to it, and I went back to my book.” Jane R. Rzepka [*Wrestling*, 150]

Sermon: “Let’s Talk About God[s] and No-God” The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

Here I am, a person with a Master of Arts in Divinity. So I’ve spent a fair amount of time thinking about God, or Godliness, or God-ish-ness.

Today, I am going to reflect on the many faces, and the null set, that is the idea of God.

One of the first questions we might ask is:

Is There a God?

The answer:

Yes. No. Maybe.

That about covers it.

I could be done right there, but not before just one joke. Folks connected with university may especially appreciate this:

Top 15 Reasons Why God Never Received Tenure

1. He had only one major publication.
2. It was in Hebrew.
3. It had no references.

4. It wasn't published in a refereed journal.
5. Some doubt He wrote it Himself.
6. He may have created the world, but what has He done since?
7. The scientific community can't replicate His results.
8. He never got permission from the ethics board to use human subjects.
9. When one experiment went awry, He tried to cover it up by drowning the subjects.
10. He rarely came to class and just told students "Read the book."
11. Some say He had His son teach the class.
12. He expelled his first two students.
13. His office hours were irregular and sometimes held on a mountain top.
14. Although there were only ten requirements, most students failed.
15. He refuses to tell anyone when the class actually ends.

Who is God? Who is this God we do, or don't, or aren't sure we think is, or isn't, or maybe is out there? Or in here? Or wherever?

For folks who say yes to the belief in God, that God – or gods – may look quite different from person to person.

In Children's Religious Exploration the kids were drawing. A little girl was asked what she was going to draw.

She replied, "I'm drawing a picture of God."

"Honey," the teacher said, "no one knows what God looks like."

The girl looked up and said: "They will when I'm done!"

So, who is God? What does God look like? What are the characteristics of the God we do – or don't – believe in?

Traditional View

There are many ways to imagine God – God's face, God's character. What we are drawn to. What repels us.

We all have seen pictures of the Sistine Chapel. God, stately, big old beard.

God as a person. A personal presence in our lives. This belief is labeled Theist. And I do know UUs who are theists.

Then the idea that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good.

Of course, many problems arise from that belief. Why does a good God permit suffering. Why did an all-knowing God create evil? Questions of theodicy. Good questions.

A couple of cartoons:

God is sitting in his easy chair watching TV. An angel comes up with a scroll to-do list.

God raises his hand and says: "I can't deal with any famines, massacres, or epidemics right now – I've got to help some guy sink a foul shot."

God, sitting at his desk, on the phone with Mrs. God. God says: "Don't hold dinner, Dear. I still have to pick winners for the JUNO Awards AND this week's football games, then help a few true believers out of a variety of scrapes."

In this traditional view, God is usually seen as non-temporal [eternal], unchanging [immutable], and unaffected by the world ills or evil, but able to change things at God's will.

Process Theology

Process philosophy, developed by Charles Hartshorne [1897-2000] and process theology, developed by Alfred North Whitehead [1861-1947], question those views.

In his book *Science and the Search for God* author Gary Kowalski writes:

“Process philosophy [Charles Hartshorne, 1897-2000] holds that materialism is mistaken. What constitutes our universe is not an assortment of lifeless particles but an ensemble of interrelated and dynamic happenings. And each of these events – from the energy that maintains a simple chemical bond to the complex flow of information through a termite mound or a coral reef – is in constant change and interaction with all the others...

Try to pick out one piece of the universe to study in isolation, and you discover that it’s connected to everything else... Every organism exists within a network of relationships – relationships between parent and offspring, predator and prey, population and food supply – [all these relationships] that enable [the organism] to live and which it in turn touches and transforms...

Kowalski continues:

I am an event. You are an event. So is a bear, a rain forest and the winding of the helix within us all. All are active participants within the bigger picture...

[Some theologians] would call that big picture God, a reality that includes all of us but is larger than any of us. [131-133]

There is nothing supernatural about the God proposed by process thought, nothing otherworldly. God is in the cosmos, though not completely identified with the cosmos, surpassing it as the Whole exceeds the parts. In a panoply of events, God is simply the Main Event. Amid a multitude of partial and imperfect relationships, God is the one to whom all are fully and perfectly related. In a ‘participatory universe’ where all have a role in the construction of reality, God is the one who participates in all life and every act of creation.” [Search, 139]

“In process theology” [Alfred North Whitehead, 1861-1947] Kowalski tells us “God’s perfection is the gift of absolute empathy and rapport. God is the One who rejoices in each creature’s ecstasy and also feels their anguish – for God is as closely related to each of us as the Whole is related to its parts.” [Search, 141]

The Transition

In his Pulitzer Prize winning book *God: A Biography* author Jack Miles asks: ‘What sort of a “person” is God?’

Miles presents God as “the protagonist of the world’s greatest book”, with various character traits, full of “depth, contradiction, and ambiguity.”

God is Creator. Destroyer. Friend of the Family. Liberator. Lawgiver. Conqueror. Arbiter. Executioner. Counselor. Fiend. [in Job] Bystander. Recluse. Puzzle.

God learns about God-Self through his interactions with humanity. Learns, and becomes more kind, more just.

In his book *The Education of God*, David Bumbaugh retells several Old Testament stories as an ongoing conversation between God and Lucifer. In one story God is trying to

teach Abraham a lesson in thinking for himself. After the episode in which Abraham almost kills his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, God & Satan meet:

God and Satan were having dessert and coffee.

“Best devil’s food cake I’ve tasted in an eon,” said Satan.

God poked absently at his plate.

“Something bothering you?” asked Lucifer.

God poked his food again.

“Oh, Lucifer,” he cried in an anguished voice, “I followed your advice. I tested Abraham. It’s worse than I feared. What am I going to do about the human race? In large groups they do vile and wicked things; isolated, they give themselves up to whatever authority they stumble across.

“Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son just because I ordered him to do it. Looking into that man’s eyes I saw generations of men and women blindly obeying orders, sending their sons and daughters to be sacrificed, to be maimed, to be slaughtered because some authority insisted it was right, or necessary, or appropriate.”

“They have a moral sense – I know they do – I built it into them. Why do they allow the demands of power to overwhelm the instinct for love? That man would have killed his son because he thought I wanted it...”

Lucifer eventually replies: “You know, perhaps if you threw fewer thunderbolts, if you let your better nature shine through, maybe human beings would learn to value love rather than power. After all, they are a very young, a very impressionable species.”

God replies: “It is so much easier being powerful than being loving. The more I love the more vulnerable I become – the more I can be hurt. Who ever heard of a vulnerable God?...”

Being God isn’t as simple as it used to be, now that there is free will in the universe,” sighed God.

Don’t give up,” laughed Satan. “You’ll get the hang of it. Those humans will make an honest God of us yet!” [*The Education of God*, pp50-52]

Perhaps we, too, still see God as that all-powerful, invulnerable, righteous, wrathful, old guy in the sky. Bumbaugh’s God is more questioning, uncertain, stumbling, soft around the edges.

A God with a Different Face Feminine

God may have a feminine face.

In Tom Owen-Towle’s book *Wrestling with God: A UU Guide for Skeptics and Believers*

he quotes Barbara Stevens:

“We’ve all seen reproductions of the painting of God in the Sistine Chapel. What we need now is new paintings.” We need new images.... “We need [to see God as] mother, lover, friend.

We need the washerwoman God who cleans us with her waters; the child God who is delighted with what we do; the gambler God who enjoys surprises. We need all the gods and goddesses who reveal truths for all the peoples of the world.

Theology is done by humans for humans. We’re the ones who construct the God-images. Our job now is to give those images meaning for our time.” [*Wrestling*, 148]

From a feminist and Nature-bound perspective, Starhawk [1951- , writer, activist and self-proclaimed witch] writes:

I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters,

I call upon your soul to arise and come unto Me.

For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe. From Me all things proceed and unto Me they must return.

Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices, for behold – all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals.

Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you.

And you who seek to know Me, know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery:

For if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without.

For behold, I have been with you from the beginning,

And I am that which is attained at the end of desire.

[*Singing the Living Tradition*, #517]

Other Images

Lots of people believe in more than one god.

There is the **Christian** idea of the Trinity – three persons in one Godhead – Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer, Holy Spirit/Enlivener.

If we’re **Hindu**, we have quite a different impression of God. Or the Gods. Brahma, the Creator God; the creator of knowledge, and of the universe. Vishnu/ Krishna – the Supreme God, the Preserver. Shiva – The Auspicious One, the Destroyer. The Timurti of Hinduism.

Krishna and Shiva are depicted with blue skin – the color of the eternal.

Ganesh, the son of Shiva and Parvati.

Ganesha is worshipped as the Remover of Obstacles, the Lord of Letters and Learning. I received my first statue of Ganesh when in seminary – a fine place of multiple obstacles and much learning.

For Mahayana **Buddhists** Kuan Yin is a goddess of compassion and mercy – a theistic conception; or as a bodhisattva, an enlightened one, a person who returns to life over and over again to liberate all beings from ignorance and *dukka* – the suffering, dissatisfaction, stress of human life.

Among Chinese Buddhist schools the personage of Guanyin is highly revered as the principle of compassion, mercy and love. Any act, thought and feeling of compassion and love is viewed as Guanyin. A merciful, compassionate, loving individual is said to be Guanyin. A meditative or contemplative state of being at peace with oneself and others is seen as Guanyin.

The Old Gods Made New

In his multiple series of books for young people, Rick Riordan writes of the gods of Olympus – the Greek pantheon, the ancient Egyptian gods, and most recently, the Norse gods of Asgard and of Yggdrasil, the World Tree that connects the nine worlds.

Then there are the movies – mummy Gods, Thor & Loki. And the various superhuman men and women depicted Christopher Knowles' [2007] book, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*.

CHORUS:

Give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion.
It's good enough for me!

We will pray to Aphrodite
Even tho' she's rather flighty
And she wears a see-through nightie
And that's good enough for me.

We will pray with those Egyptians
Built pyramids to put our crypts in
Cover subways with inscriptions
And that's good enough for me.

O-old Odin we will follow
And in fighting we will wallow
'Til we wind up in Valhalla
And that's good enough for me.

Pete Seeger and "Anonymous Filk Singers." Seeger reports that "Filk Singers" are science fiction fans who enjoy writing folk music parodies.

Mystical/Apophatic/Mystery Views

In Christianity the apophatic tradition, negative theology, the *via negativa* is a way of theological thinking that attempts to sweep away God-descriptors.

Almost 2000 years ago, the ancient Desert Mothers and Fathers developed this meditative process. First, we affirm what we think God is. Next we recognize the absurdity of trying to capture God in a series of adjectives or verbs, and so we deny each one of these attributes. Finally, in the course of this practice, "we learn that God transcends the capability of human speech and 'is beyond every assertion' and 'beyond every denial.'" [Case, 126; from Denys, *Mystical Theology*]

“Silence is the only medium in which it is possible to apprehend the divine,” writes Karen Armstrong in *The Case for God* [110] Only in wordless contemplation of God can we find inner tranquility.

In the tradition of the mystics, God can only be known through subjective experience, intuition, insight. Somewhat akin to the experience of enlightenment.

“This power which I cannot explain or know or name I call God. God is not God’s name. God is my name for the mystery that looms within and arches beyond the limits of my being. Life force, spirit of life, ground of being, these too are names for the unnamable which I am now content to call my God. Frank Forrest Church [*Wrestling*, 140]

Biochemist Erwin Chargaff [whose theories were instrumental in discovering the helix form of DNA] tells us: “It is the sense of mystery that, in my opinion, drives the true scientist; the same blind force, blindly seeing, deafly hearing, unconsciously remembering, that drives the larva into the butterfly.

If [the scientist] has not experienced, at least a few times in his life, this cold shudder down his spine, this confrontation with an immense invisible face whose breath moves him to tears, he is not a scientist.” *The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe*, Michael Reagan, ed., 89

In *Skeptics and True Believers* physicist and naturalist Chet Raymo writes: “It is the nature of God to reside in mystery – ineluctable, inexhaustible mystery. We do not need to understand the cabala mathematical physics to apprehend the *mysterium tremendum* [a mystery before which we both tremble and are fascinated, both repelled and attracted]. We need only look out the window.” [*The Hand of God*, 89]

Which brings to mind a song, sung by a young colleague in a group of ministers asked: What is the song in your heart?

Sung:

Oh Jesus, I love You
And I love Buddha too
Ramakrishna, Guru Dev
Tao Te Ching and Mohammed

Why do some people say
That there is just one way
To love You, God, and come to You?
We are all a part of You

You are un-nameable
You are unknowable

All we have is metaphor
That's what time and space are for

Is the universe Your thought?
You are and You are not
You are many, You are one
Ever ending, just begun

Alright, alright, alright
I love You and Buddha too

Mason Jennings, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbSOPuN7OhE>; accessed 10 May 2016.

“It is not that I am wed to the word “God”; what is of concern to me is that I be a religious person. To be religious is to be tethered to trust, bold in pursuit of justice, and grateful for grace. For me the word “God’ is a useful way of signaling all of that – reminding me that love is transforming, that Creation is a blessing, and that sometimes at twilight the mountains have wings.” William Schulz [*Wrestling*, 143]

“When people ask me whether I believe God exists, my answer is yes. I believe God exists in a way similar to the way beauty exists, but not in the way a person or an apple exists... God... is an experience, akin to our experience of beauty. Beauty itself never appears to us, but we find the idea necessary to account for our delight in the symmetry and form of certain objects and experiences: sunsets, symphonies, and sculptures by Degas. While different in many other respects, beauty and God are both qualities of our experience.” Galen Guengerich in *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age*, 78-79

Agnostic / Non-theist / Atheist / Humanist

For those of us who claim the title agnostic, non-theist, atheist, or humanist – what can I say?

I am reminded of several jokes:

“You don’t believe in God?” the astonished fundamentalist asked the UU. “Why not?”
“The same reason you don’t believe in any of the other gods,” replied the UU. [*Laugh*, 29, 2004 ed.]

“How does a UU compliment an atheist?
O ye of little faith.” [*The Church Where People Laugh*, Gwen Foss, ed., 2004, 74]

“What’s the worst thing about being an atheist UU? Having no one to talk to during sex.”
[*Laugh*, 39, 2004 ed.]

In Tom Owen-Towles book *Wrestling with God: A UU Guide for Skeptics and Believers*

UU Henry Stone says: "I am an atheist. It's hard to say this without sounding either boastful or apologetic, and I don't mean to be either. Although it's not part of the usual definition of atheism, I believe all our actions, words, and thoughts affect the structure of the universe. Our effect may be vanishingly small, but when many people act or think in unison, the effect is multiplied many times." Thus says,. [148]

And UU Carol Wintermute states: "It has always seemed evident to me that we live in an indifferent universe. It is up to us to make of it what we can. The only thing God adds to this situation is a wish that somebody stronger than ourselves is making things go well for us in the long run. The real negative of God is that we give up our responsibility to make this earth a good place to live. [*Wrestling*, 138]

Theist/Humanist Conundrum

[Sung to the tune "You Are Sixteen" from *The Sound of Music*]

You Are Theist I Am Humanist

You are theist I am humanist
I think that you're naive
You have no proof to offer as truth,
You simply say "I believe"

New Age bubbles get you in trouble
Lost in a feel-good fluff
True understanding is quite demanding
Praying is not enough.

Totally unprepared are you
To make a case that's plain
Maybe the incense, chants, and drums
Have ruined your poor brain.

You need someone older and wiser
Telling you what to do,
You are theist, I am humanist
I--will think--for you!

I am theist, you are humanist
You're locked inside your head.
You're existential, self-referential
Claiming that God is dead,

Occam's razor, Pascal's wager
Soul-less tautology
Wisdom, traditions, not erudition
Make much more sense to me.

Totally unprepared are you
 To let go of your mind.
 How 'bout a leap of faith, my friend
 You might like what you find.

When you find that you're out of answers
 You won't know what to do
 I am theist, you are humanist,
 I -- will pray -- for you.

We cannot agree on anything
 Each has a point of view,
 I am theist --- I am humanist
 That's why we're UU.

by Meg and Scott Bassinson of Albany, New York.

Our Part to Play

“Often theists and atheists seem offended by the other’s position, as though somehow it had been adopted merely to insult them. To overcome this, we must learn not only to be honest ourselves but to accept each other’s honesty, whatever our theological perspective. We must learn from each other. Ken Phifer [*Wrestling*, 142]

The beauty of this faith, for many of us, is that we are non-creedal. One size does not fit all. We are charged to accept and encourage one another in our spiritual growth. To a free and responsible search for what is most true [most loving, most just] to ourselves.

We are about deeds, not creeds.

We are all humanists, in the sense that we see ourselves as the heads and hands and hearts that will make this earth a good place to live. We are called to work – in whatever small and big ways we can – for an earth made fair, and all her people one.

We may not talk about money, or our income, or our age or dress size. But let us talk about our visions of the Divine, in our Fellowships and Societies and Churches.

Let us talk with each other. Listen to one another. Learn from each other.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.

Dogs' Letters to God

Dear God:

How come people love to smell flowers, but seldom smell one another? Where are their priorities?

Dear God:

When we get to Heaven, can we sit on your couch? Or is it the same old story?

Dear God:

If a dog barks his head off in the forest and no human hears him, is he still a bad dog?

Dear God:

If we come back as humans, is that good or bad?

Dear God:

We dogs can understand human verbal instructions, hand signals, whistles, horns, clickers, beepers, scent ID's, electromagnetic energy fields, and Frisbee flight paths. What do humans understand?

Dear God:

Are there mailmen in Heaven? If there are, will I have to apologize?

Cat's Letter to God

Dear God:

Do you exist? I'm just curious. I don't really care.

And, there is the cartoon:

God, standing on a cloud with the Archangel Michael, both looking at the Earth. God says: "Truth be told, if it wasn't for dogs, I would have blown it up years ago."