

WHICH GOD DON'T YOU BELIEVE IN?

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“Intellectual high treason” is a harsh charge for anyone to level. And yet, those are the very words that Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, saves for those who use the term “God” to mean something other than the supernatural, interventionist God that he rejects.

I have to say I react strongly to that charge. My own theology includes a concept of God that is very similar to the God of Einstein, the presence of mystery in the natural world, something past the limits of human understanding. To this understanding, I might add that I believe in a force that connects all beings in unity.

The God that I believe in has nothing in common with a judgmental, angry, supernatural being who takes sides in wars and football games, who punishes people for loving one another or wearing blended fabrics, and who intervenes in the world on a daily basis.

Nor does the God that I believe in have anything to do with the dispassionate God of the Deists, who set things in motion at the beginning and now sits back and watches them with cold indifference.

Neither of those are the God I believe in, and on this point, Richard Dawkins and I can agree.

Psychology professor Jonathan Haidt attempts to look at the work of what he calls “the new atheists,” who include Dawkins, Sam Harris and others, through a more objective lens than they use themselves. A self-described atheist scientist, Haidt believes that Dawkins and others have strayed from scientific principles in defense of their atheist beliefs.

Haidt identifies several ways in which the “new atheists” engage in non-scientific arguments about their belief system. The first is one as a misunderstanding of the role of religion in people’s lives. “The new atheists,” he writes, “treat religions as sets of beliefs about the world, many of which are demonstrably false. Yet anthropologists and sociologists who study religion stress the role of ritual and community much more than of factual beliefs about the creation of the world or life after death.” (Jonathan Haidt, *Moral Psychology and the Misunderstanding of Religion*, found on-line at http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/haidt07/haidt07_index.html)

Haidt’s conclusion is one that will probably resonate with many Unitarian Universalists. He writes, “My point is just that every longstanding ideology and way of life contains some wisdom, some insights into ways of suppressing selfishness, enhancing cooperation, and ultimately enhancing human flourishing.” (Ibid.)

Whether or not we choose to use the term “God,” I think that there is merit in understanding that a belief in God *can be* a good thing. I think there’s merit in understanding that by looking at what we can understand are healthy, inclusive views of God, we can learn something from the experiences and traditions of others that will inform how we live our lives.

As Unitarian Universalists, we understand that each person brings with them to our community a piece of the truth. We come together despite great differences in our theological beliefs in order that we might learn from one another, that we might share our understanding of truth with respect and openness. So today, whatever your theology, I challenge you to explore God with me, that you might find in that exploration a way to nourish your own spirituality.

If you come here with your own belief in God, I hope that at the end of our journey you have a new understanding of how that belief can be shared with others in an authentic and respectful way.

If you come here unsure about God, perhaps uncomfortable with the word, or perhaps scarred by another religious communities' narrow view of God, I hope that you can make some peace with the term.

If you come here agreeing with Richard Dawkins, it is possible (maybe even likely) that at the end of this exploration, you will still consider the use of the word "God" to be abhorrent and beyond reconciliation with your own experiences and thoughts. That's fine. My hope, though, is that you'll find and use your own words to mean what I mean when I say "God." My hope is that we can discover a language that connects your theology with mine—because I don't believe they're too far apart.

Far from being a source for moral guidance, or a way to abdicate our own human responsibility for using our power to change our world, God to me is a concept useful in giving humans some perspective.

And that perspective is important—no matter what name you attach to it. Such perspective is, to me, the best argument for developing a theology that includes an authentic, meaningful word for something ultimate in the universe, whether or not others consider your theology naïve or treasonous.

And so it is to this perspective that I turned when I was asked by Paul—who won the sermon topic of his choice in last year's Service Auction—to examine what "spirituality" might mean to an atheist.

When I am asked to define spirituality in a way that is inclusive of different theological viewpoints, I like to say that it is our relationship to that which is greater than we are.

I, for one, think it's useful to have a concept of something greater than we are as individual humans. It is useful for us to embrace something in our life that is worthy of reverence—something that inspires in us awe, something that we hold with enough value (enough worth) that it inspires us to worship. It is useful, I believe, for humans to have something in our lives that inspires humility, something that helps us understand that for all that we can control, there is much that we cannot.

For me, this is the primary reason I am comfortable with the concept of God, despite the fact that I don't believe in the God that Richard Dawkins and the "new atheists" reject any more than they do.

In 2001, the Rev. Forrest Church, now the Minister for Public Theology at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in Manhattan, published an essay on Universalism in our Association's magazine, *UU World*. In it, he wrote this:

"Today, when people boast to me that they don't believe in God, I ask them to tell me a little about the God they don't believe in. Almost surely, I don't believe in 'Him' either. As the ancient Hebrews recognized, God is not even God's name. God is our name for a power that is greater than all and yet present in each: the life

force, the Holy, Being itself. God doesn't exist only because we need God; we exist because the universe was pregnant with us when it was born. In miracle and fact, our gestation traces to the beginning of time. Accidents abound, of course. One amino [acid] lapse or missed [DNA] coupling and we would not be in the position to wonder why we are here. Yet, in my experience," Church writes, "only by positing the existence of a power beyond our comprehension can we begin to account for the miracle of being with an appropriate measure of humility and awe."

He continued, "I recognize that for many people the word God has shrunk from repeated use, but we can always stretch it again. If you can't manage to do this — the 'G word' fitting your mind more like a straightjacket than a divine garment — then simply substitute another. Spirit may work for you, or the sacred, or higher power. As long as the object of your reverence is large enough, it doesn't really matter, not at all. (Forrest Church "Universalism: A Theology for the 21st Century," UU World November/December 2001, found on-line at <http://www.uuworld.org/2001/05/feature1.html>)

I would guess that Rev. Church's list of alternative words is not long enough for many here. To his list, I would add beauty, nature, life and community. I invite you to make the list even longer.

But the point is to find something that inspires you to understand yourself in the context of a much larger system of being.

In his article, Forrest Church tells a story about his late father, four-term Idaho Senator Frank Church, whose political career is remembered, among other reasons, for his advocacy of environmental policies that set aside vast wilderness areas and protected scenic river systems. Rev. Church writes:

"Three weeks before he died, my father chose the words for his tombstone. He weighed what message to post for strangers who might visit his neighborhood some century hence. When we wander through graveyards, we weigh our own mortality, so the 'final instructions' Frank Church left for future generations to ponder are humble words, yet more than worthy of the splendid stone into which we carved them: *'I never knew [anyone] who felt self-important in the morning after spending the night in the open on an Idaho mountainside under a star-studded summer sky. Don't forget to spend some time in nature, where you can bear witness to the wonder of God.'*"

(Forrest Church "Universalism: A Theology for the 21st Century," UU World November/December 2001, found on-line at <http://www.uuworld.org/2001/05/feature1.html>)

Church continues, explaining that "[t]heologians are wise to close their learned tomes at times and reopen the book of nature. Theology is a human construct. It begins with the miracle of our own existence." (Ibid.)

There is something about the power of nature that inspires many people to awe and humility. For this reason, I think that looking at our relationship to nature is one of the most powerful ways to feel spirituality. It is indeed in nature that I find my own connection to God.

Rather than being an "emotionally unsatisfying" view of God, as Carl Sagan is quoted by Richard Dawkins as having described it, understanding God as inherent in all things in nature is deeply meaningful and powerful.

I have come to understand that what I label "God" exists in my relationship with every other being in our Universe—with other humans, certainly, but also with the trees and the rocks, with animals and plants, with the leaping waters of rivers and the setting sun. Connections exist between me and every planet, every atom, every unfathomable blip in the deepest, darkest reaches of space.

Like Senator Church, I find that pondering my place in the vastness of our universe—be it under a wide-open sky in the mountains or from the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge, sitting by a waterfall or meandering through city crowds—is a humbling and important part of my life.

This, I must admit, is awesome, and provokes in me a profound sense of awe whenever I allow myself to experience it. This is a God of poetry, of metaphor, of beauty, a God that transcends notion of “intellectual treason.”

Poet e. e. cummings wrote in exultation to such a God: “i thank you God for most this amazing/day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees/and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything/which is natural which is infinite which is yes” (

William Blake’s poem “Auguries of Innocence,” a musical setting of which our choir sang the beginning of today, highlights the tension between the God of Western religion and the notion of God as inherent in all of nature.

Blake writes, “To see a world in a grain of sand/And heaven in a wild flower/Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,/And eternity in an hour.”

To Blake, the vastness of nature is found in even the tiniest of things, and infinity can be held in a finite place. This view seems to square with a pantheist view of the world. To me, the title of Blake’s poem asks us to believe that seeing the world this way is a sign of hope, of innocence, in a world otherwise filled with violence and grief.

“Auguries of Innocence” also gives us a direct view of one way to view God. It ends with these lines: “God appears, and God is light/To those poor souls who dwell in night;/But does a human form display/To those who dwell in realms of day.”

This ending is the culmination of many images that all seem to call humans to treat other beings on this Earth with care and compassion rather than cruelty. Why end the poem the way he does, though?

Perhaps it is because Blake is asking us to see God in our fellow humans—to treat one another as if we contained a spark of the divine.

And this is another way in which religious liberals have come to terms with the concept of God—as the life force that dwells within each of us. Reverence for this life force can, if we let it, change the way we treat one another. It can, if we let it, change the way we view society, or community.

Margaret Silf has collected wisdom stories from around the world in a lovely book. One of those stories, which I’ve used as a reading in other settings here, is entitled “The Stranger’s Gift.” In the story, a village falls upon hard times. People begin to argue with one another for no apparent reason. Travelers went out of their way not to stop in this village lest they have to spend time around the quarreling villagers.

One day, a stranger comes to the village and claims to know a secret that could help. The secret, says the stranger, is that one of the villagers is the Messiah. The villagers, upon learning this secret, began to treat each other differently. “People began to treat each other with reverence,” Silf writes, “They lived like people who had a common purpose, and who were seeking for something very precious together, never quite knowing

whether the treasure was actually right in front of them.” (Margaret Silf, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, pp. 130-131)

Of course, it is not necessary to have a concept of God in order to treat one another with respect. It is certainly not the case that a belief in God has anything necessarily to do with the development of morality or fairness—and the “new atheists” are right to point this out.

And yet, the story in this book illustrates one concept of God that could, if we let it, be beneficial to our own spiritual journeys, no matter what our theology is. We are right to learn lessons from traditions that teach that each of us contains a part of God—lessons that ask us to proclaim a reverence for life.

I believe it is a good thing that humans understand there to be something greater than we are. I believe that such an understanding puts our daily lives into a larger context, it provides us with inspiration to carry on in the face of difficulty, it asks us to recognize that the world will carry on after we are gone.

Understanding that we as individuals are not the ultimate end of all being also asks us to connect our lives to something beyond ourselves—be that the preservation of our environment, the human quest for knowledge and understanding, the creation of justice in our society, or the reconciliation of strained relationships in our lives.

The thing that we define as greater than ourselves certainly does not have to be God—and it *most* certainly doesn’t have to be a supernatural, interventionist notion of God. But I do believe that we each need to find it somewhere in our theology.

Today I ask those of you who claim not to believe in God this: Which God don’t you believe in? Chances are, I don’t believe in that God, either. Perhaps, given this common ground, we can talk about what it is, then, that inspires us to reverence and awe, whatever words we choose.