

The G– Word

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God – is there another word that stirs up more passions than that – for and against? As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I’ve learned to be very careful about using the word at all because I’ve found I can lose the attention of half of the congregation just by saying it. A show of hands – how many have I lost already? There’s a tendency among our congregations to avoid God talk entirely because of what it stirs up. It’s a controversy that has genuine historical roots.

When the Unitarians and the Universalists moved toward their merger in 1961, the conflict between humanists and theists was nearly a deal-breaker. At that time, Unitarianism was a rational humanist enterprise through and through. The Humanist Manifesto of 1933 merely affirmed what was already in practice for Unitarians: the centrality of reason and the complete rejection of any division between the sacred and the secular. Universalism, on the other hand, was a truly modern liberal religious denomination, but quite comfortably theistic. Universalists never needed to reject Christianity; they simply reformed it as a religion of love and reconciliation. Their God was thoroughly positive and empowering, nurturing the wholeness of individuals and communities, and held all of creation in gentle hands of light and love. A primary scriptural source for them was the fourth chapter of John, which says, “God is Love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him [or her].”

Despite their fundamental theological disagreement, the Unitarians and the Universalists found they had ample common ground. Both embraced the advances of science in understanding humanity and the cosmos, both embraced the responsibility for social justice, both embraced each individual’s responsibility for her or his own choices. And we found a way to emphasize our common ground while respecting our differences in our seven principles, which affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Although many congregations seem to uphold the principles as a kind of creed, a set of things we all believe, they are really more the product of a political compromise. If you look at them closely, from the first, affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to the seventh, recognizing the interdependent web of all of existence, there's not one word of traditional religious language in them. The Unitarians and Universalists agreed to place their various beliefs in the sources section, following. So it's farther down the line where we find reference to Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love," and "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason." We find our refuge in the footnotes.

It's been said that, as useful as they are in providing an ethical basis for our religiously diverse congregations, nobody ever asked to have the seven principles read to them on their deathbed. So where do we turn for the kind of compassionate support we need in times of crisis?

Some years ago, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association delivered a sermon where he talked about a turning point in his religious worldview. He described sitting in a hospital room with his 15-year-old son who was being treated for a severe drug overdose. It was unclear whether he would live. And Sinkford, who up to that time would have described himself as rational humanist, found himself praying. First, he said "the selfish prayers for forgiveness . . . for the time not made, for the too many trips, for the many things unsaid, and, sadly, for the few things that should never have passed my lips. But as the night darkened, I finally found the pure prayer. The prayer that asked only that my son would live. And late in the evening, I felt the hands of

a loving universe reaching out to hold. The hands of God, the Spirit of Life. The name was unimportant. I knew that those hands would be there to hold me whatever the morning brought. And I knew, though I cannot tell you how, that those hands were holding my son as well. I knew that I did not have to walk that path alone, that there is a love that has never broken faith with us and never will.”

Bill Sinkford, a confirmed humanist, was surprised that he found what he needed through prayer, and changed his mind about religious language. He called for Unitarian Universalists to develop a language of reverence, a way to acknowledge the presence and power of the holy in our lives. There was a reporter who present that morning who got it wrong, writing that Sinkford said that our principles *should* contain traditional religious language. Many shocked UU humanists felt betrayed by this abandonment of the compromise that made UU merger possible. This was unfortunate, because our principles continue to provide the ethical basis for our denomination’s diversity.

One thing that makes it especially difficult for us to refer to God is that we live in a culture that has largely defined that word in a way that is completely at odds with its historical usage. For most religions, Islam, Hindu, Aboriginal, Native American, and even Greek Orthodox, God is seen as a profound mystery that cannot be explained, that cannot be separated from the world. It is only recently in the West that God has become an object among objects, something that can be known and understood and defined precisely.

The Lakota people refer to God as “Great Mystery.” This has been translated as Great Spirit, but that’s way too narrow. They also refer to “grandfather.” These two terms demonstrate their embrace of the paradox between mystery and intimacy. Both terms describe a relationship that has seemed self-evident to most human cultures: just as a painting cannot understand the artist to whom it owes its existence, just as a clay bowl cannot understand the mind behind the hands that shaped it, nothing which has been created – including humans – can fully understand its creator.

Early Christianity embraced this divine mystery, at least until Augustin, Bishop of Hippo developed the idea of original sin in the fourth century. This doctrine led to a belief in a judging, punishing God, and Christians ever since have lived out that belief through paroxysms of hatred and killing, to which many

have responded by blaming God or blaming the idea of God. But it wasn't God who committed all those atrocities; they were done by people in the name of a certain kind of God. And remember that most of the wars and mass murders in the 20th century were politically, not religiously motivated.

So what do Unitarian Universalists mean when we talk about God? Well, one thing we can be sure of is that most are not thinking of a male with a big robe and beard sitting on a throne, looking down and judging us. In fact, many UU's have rejected the idea of God altogether as unnecessary and even harmful.

But we have to be careful of defining ourselves on the basis of what we do not believe. Garrison Keillor talks about a friend of his who is an atheist. "Actually," Garrison says, "he's a Lutheran atheist, because it's the Lutheran God that he doesn't believe in."

Unitarian Universalist minister Fred Campbell defines integrity as the condition that exists when our language matches our experience. We all know that saying one thing and doing its opposite displays a lack of integrity, and that's the main way we use the term. But Fred Campbell points out that there's another dimension to integrity: we need language that is adequate to describe our experience. It's hard to understand our experience if we lack the language to describe it. And rejecting religious language because we disagree with how it has been used leaves us unprepared to deal with the holy in our own lives when we encounter it.

Everyone encounters the holy from time to time. Everyone does. Huston Smith, the historian of religion, once startled me by saying that he has no patience with people who say they are spiritual but not religious. I didn't like that at the time. He said that spirituality is everywhere; it comes and goes, but that it is religion that gives spirituality traction in history. By this he means that we need a community that helps us give meaning to our experience, that without religious language we are prone to trivialize the spiritual as merely a good feeling rather than the profound dimension that it is.

I'd like you to know what I mean when I say God. Like many of you, I had rejected the God of my childhood religion and felt the better for it. But, like Bill Sinkford, I found myself having experiences I couldn't explain without religious language.

I remember in particular one summer that I spent hiking and camping in the high peaks area of the Rocky Mountains near Boulder, Colorado. I had been sitting with a group around a campfire and wandered away to sit on a rocky outcropping under the dome of the night sky.

As I sat there I felt taken out of myself, the myriad stars pulsing with a living light, the night, the mountains, the granite anchored deep in the bosom of the earth, and I, myself. All sense of separation disappeared. There was no longer any sense of subject and object, the seer and the seen, but a merging that was filled with clarity, love and joy. I remember wondering what this was, it was so breathtakingly beautiful but at the same time it was so very down-to-earth and normal feeling. I don't know how long I sat there, but when I rejoined my friends I realized that I was experiencing the same kind of transcendent intimacy with the burning fire and with each person there as I had with the mountains and stars just moments before. And I remember thinking, with some astonishment, "This is what Jesus was talking about! This is the kingdom of heaven! This is what they mean when they say 'God.' "

This insight helped me to hold on to that experience, but it was derived from a version of Christianity that had no place for it. Fortunately, Emerson's words helped me to place this experience in a broader context that included a new understanding of God from a Transcendentalist perspective in his essay, "The Oversoul," where he said:

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.

As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall on the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.

I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine. There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us. Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable.

It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur. The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception.

Within us is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.

I can explain but not justify my experience of God because I am a mystic, a person whose knowledge of God comes from experience rather than reason. I am grateful for the counsel of reason that helps me to discern delusion, but am even more grateful for the direct experience of divinity, because it gives my life meaning and purpose. It gives me direction: I want to live in such a way that I may more fully embody the creative wisdom and compassion that is revealed in religious experience. As the theologian Henry Nelson Wieman says, God is “That reality the perfect adjustment to which yields the ultimate human good,” and that’s good enough for me. Thank God.

It might be enough to leave it at that. Many of you know that much of my personal spiritual life is based in Buddhist practices, an agnostic tradition that does quite well without any idea of God. It might be enough, but I don’t believe that it is enough, because we live in a larger community that often uses the word “God” to mean very different things and accomplish very different ends from those I’ve described this morning. And my revelation requires me to do what I can to play my part in reclaiming the meaning of religion. And we can’t do it without using religious language.

Our movement is rightfully proud of its place as an ethical voice in America’s civic culture. But our voice is conspicuously absent from a religious discourse that has become ever more significant every year. And it is absent because we refuse to use the language of that discourse – we exclude ourselves by refusing to use the language in which that discourse is conducted. I, for one, am not willing to cede the debate to those whose definition of God I neither recognize nor respect. I believe we have a moral and ethical responsibility to learn to use religious language to express views that are different from the religious right in America. We can use that language to promote a progressive agenda for faith and society. We can promote family values that are actually our family values. And it’s hard to do it if we’re unwilling to speak the language.

You know, sometimes, it's like we're really sophisticated in our understanding of economics and we really know what that means and we know the forces and influences and imbalances that make up economics on a local and global scale. But we know that the word "money" isn't really what people think it is. As a matter of fact, it's just a word that gets in the way of truly understanding economics. And so we refuse to use the word "money," but we want to talk to the world about economics. And the world doesn't understand economics without the word money, the same as the world doesn't understand religious and spiritual values without the word, "god."

I'd like to tell you about something that happened to me in the Raleigh-Durham airport on my way to Indianapolis for an interview with the ministerial search committee in 2004. I was feeling really upbeat about my faith and future as a minister that day. I had a little time before my flight so I decided to have my shoes shined at the stand in the concourse. I chatted with the man shining my shoes whose accent suggested was a recent immigrant from Africa. He asked me where I was going, and I told him I was a minister on the way to a job interview in Indianapolis. He asked what my church thought about gay marriage. When I said that we supported equal marriage rights for all, he launched into a stern, biblically derived condemnation of the immorality of homosexuality. I realized that my morally and ethically reasoned position would have no persuasive effect on this man, so I tried to think of something that I could say. I told him that my God was a God of love, and that he wanted all his children to be happy and live in peace together.

His brows furrowed and he thought for a moment. "Yes, it is difficult to live together in peace, isn't it? My God wants that, too."

My God wants that, too. May it be so.