

Thoughts on God
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
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When my son Eric was four years old, he came home one day from watching TV at a friend’s house with exciting news for his parents: “On this TV show today I learned about God – he is a man with a long white beard, and he wears a white robe, sits in a big chair, and decides whether people go to heaven or hell!” His father and I looked at each other and said, “We gotta get a church!”

Our little family had been happily unchurched until that time, having left behind the religious traditions in which we had been raised by our very religious parents – Catholic and Methodist, respectively. But our son’s discovery of other people’s ideas about God, particularly those ideas presented on Christian TV shows for children, made us realize that we wanted and needed a faith community in which our own values and beliefs could be explored, and where Eric could explore, develop, and come to his own conclusions about the nature of ultimate reality, the nature of the divine, his own thoughts on God.

Thinking about God, talking about God, is very common in American society. A book published in 2010, *America’s Four Gods*, draws from the results of the Baylor Religion Survey – a national randomized survey of over 3,000 Americans – followed by in-depth interviews that asked people in various areas of the United States what they thought about the nature, the personality, of God.

So what did the research team find? Well, I was pleased to note that it turns out that in at least some ways, the Universalists won. The dominant story about God in the United States is that God is loving – there is almost universal agreement among believers that God is a devoted, kind and loving parent. In the history of our religious tradition, the Universalists were those believers who rejected the Calvinist notion of a punishing God, drawing their own conclusions from the Christian Bible in defiance of the dominant beliefs of the day.

The term Universalist comes from a belief in Universal salvation – a firm belief that God is like a loving father, and that a loving God would not send any of his children to hell. I have heard it said that Universalism became very small and nearly died out as a distinct religious tradition because they succeeded in bringing their beliefs into the mainstream, and over time most of the major Christian denominations moved into agreement with them – they lost their distinctive niche by getting everyone on board with their radical idea of God’s universal love.

But after you get past the loving part, that is where our common ground in belief about God ends. It turns out that what our own faith tradition celebrates is true for the nation as a whole: our beliefs about the existence and nature of God, what we think about the true nature of ultimate reality, are all over the map, highly varied and personal. In all except the most radical and cultish of religious groups, people have their own private beliefs that may have little to do with what is preached from the pulpit or discussed in Bible study.

We cannot even tell by whether people go to church – a lot of people believe strongly in God but do not participate in organized religion, and there are many atheists seated in the pews of Unitarian Universalist churches every Sunday – and even in the pews of Lutheran or Methodist churches – more than one might expect.

The researchers focused on the answers to two questions in the survey: “To what extent does God interact with the world?”– and “To what extent does God judge the world?” Based on people’s responses to those two questions, they developed a four-way typology of how Americans think about God – America’s “Four Gods,” as they say, and then they acknowledge the fifth category of atheists, whose thoughts about God are that there is no God.

The first God, the Authoritative God, is both engaged in the world and judgmental.

The second, the Benevolent God, is engaged, but non-judgmental

The third, the Critical God, is judgmental but not engaged

The fourth, the Distant God, is neither judgmental nor engaged.

The fifth, the Un-God, isn’t.

Just under half of all Americans believe in a God who provides us with rules and “judges the world” – those are the ones who believe in an Authoritative or Critical God. The Authoritative God is probably the one that first comes to mind when we hear people talking about God in America. The Authoritative God is both judgmental and engaged. He (and this God is usually described as male) has a firm opinion about what is right and wrong. He has transmitted that opinion through various prophets and teachers, makes day to day judgments about human events, and takes actions that have a direct effect on human lives. Those who believe in the Authoritative God are more likely to describe God as similar to a human father: commanding in appearance, and swift to take action to discipline us when we stray from the path.

These believers tend to be more judgmental themselves about absolutes of right or wrong, based mostly on what they think God thinks about the issue – be that issue abortion, gay marriage, stem-cell research or how we should solve the problems of poverty and oppression. They often give God the credit or blame for causing natural disasters or disease, seeing these events as a form of divine punishment for our mis-deeds. That is the Authoritative God.

While we are talking about judgmental gods, the Critical God is the other of America’s four Gods who has specific standards about right and wrong, and who judges us based on those standards – although the Critical God does not actively intervene in the events of the world or human lives. Under the Critical God, there are divinely provided rules for what is right and what is wrong, and divine justice will be felt, not in this world, but in the afterlife.

It is not surprising to note that this belief tends to be held more frequently by people who are in ethnic minorities, the poor, the oppressed – those who cannot see any evidence that God is helping or rewarding them in this life, but who rely instead on a belief that the score will be evened out in the next life. They believe that punishment will be meted out to those who have oppressed them, and there will be a reward for those who have borne their suffering with grace and humility. These believers, like those who believe in the Authoritative God, also judge the world based on what they have been told are God’s teachings, though they are less likely to attribute natural disasters to the hand of God.

So that is about half of the American population -- 47% -- who believe in the Judging God, either Authoritative or Critical -- 31% for the Authoritative God, and 16% for the Critical God. That means that half the American population understands human events to be judged according to a divine system of measurement, the details of which are provided by the specific religious tradition they follow, whether or not that God acts directly in our lives to enforce those judgments.

Then there is the other half, 48% of the population, who believe that God is not rule-making or judging, but rather pretty much neutral on human foibles, and that God could be either Benevolent or Distant, depending on their perception of God's direct engagement with the world.

Those who believe that God is Benevolent see God as personally engaged with the world in a positive way. These are the folks who see God's hand in everything from the unfolding of a lovely flower to their good fortune in finding a great parking spot on a busy street; they picture God as a nurturing, supportive parent who wants everything to go well for us in the world. These believers tend to find the silver lining in the clouds of natural disasters – rather than focusing on what caused the harm, they see Divine intervention in amazing acts of human kindness and generosity, lives miraculously saved, the home that the tornado did not hit, the small child who survived the flood – all these are interpreted as signs of God's benevolent work in the world. Some of these may subscribe to what is called Process Theology, envisioning God in interaction with human lives and human events, rejoicing and sorrowing with us, drawing us, persuading us, toward what is good.

The final large group is the quarter of Americans, 24%, who believe in a Distant God, a God that exists, but is neither judgmental nor engaged with the world, hence “distant.” Many of these believers count themselves as theists or deists, and their language about God may include terms such as Primary Cause, the God behind the Big Bang, the Creative Force or Spirit of Life. God may even be seen as a Supreme Being, but one who is so far above us that God has no need or desire to be adored or placated.

Theologian Michael Dowd, author of *Thank God For Evolution!*, preaches a God of the Big Bang, of cosmic energy, the life force – that is another example of the Distant God. This God is more abstract, less like a person, not making any judgment about human actions, not directly causing events in the natural world. In the research on beliefs about the nature of God, many agnostics actually fell into this Distant God category. Agnostics believe there really is no way to know whether there is a God, so they stand apart from any effort to define the nature or personality of God, but in their un-knowing they remain open to the idea that there is some sort of supernatural realm, something beyond human knowing, although they are not comfortable with any of the conventional, more personalized characterizations of God.

Belief in a Benevolent or Distant God seem to underlie a more flexible set of judgments about social and moral issues for these believers. As the Benevolent God is supportive and not judgmental, and as the Distant God does not get involved in human affairs, there is more room for human initiative and responsibility to solve the world's problems as best we can, rather than relying on unbending rules from Divine teachings, or divine intervention in the problems and progress of the world.

And the final category, of course, is that of the atheists – those whose definition the researchers call the Un-God -- who comprise 5% of the American population. The authors say, and I agree, that it makes sense to include atheists in the analysis because their nonbelief is as important in defining their worldview as another person's belief in God. And while 5% is not as large as any of the other belief groups in this country, atheism is significant and has an important effect on the religious nature of our society. And of course, atheism has a strong effect on the religious texture of our Unitarian Universalist churches, since Religious Humanism was born within the Unitarian framework and opened our tradition more fully to the entire range of beliefs about God, in a way not very common among faith traditions.

The findings in this study reflect my own experience in talking with people about their beliefs, and that is that you cannot tell what a person believes by knowing what religion they affiliate with, or by whether they affiliate with any religious tradition at all. There are some general patterns of course – Evangelicals tend to believe in an Authoritative God, who is both engaged and judgmental, while those who do not affiliate with any religious tradition tend to favor Critical or Distant, unengaged, non-interfering, Gods.

But for people who say they are practicing Catholics, Jews or in one of the Mainline protestant traditions, their beliefs are spread out across all God types including the Un-God of atheists – in every religious tradition, we find people whose God may be Authoritative, Critical, Benevolent or Distant, and those whose belief is atheism. I will admit, the phrase Roman Catholic Atheist bends even my mind a little bit.

This reminds me of my friend who is an apparently devout life-long and very involved member of a Lutheran church. As this man and I got to know each other and talked about our beliefs, he admitted something he had never before told anyone, not even his wife or daughters: that he did not believe in God. But he stayed very involved in church, and felt strongly about the church as a supportive community, as a center for transmitting positive values to the next generation, and for meaningful social justice engagement with the world. Just not the part about God. There is simply no way to know what people believe by observing their participation in a religious community.

So where do our beliefs about the nature and personality of God come from? As you might guess, we begin shaping our beliefs about God, or about un-God, early in life, starting when we are still toddlers learning the basics about the world. As the authors of *America's Four Gods* say, “Childhood images of God come from myriad sources: our parents, our religious tradition, our peers and our culture. While there are never absolute predictors of a person’s religious beliefs, there are clear patterns indicating which relationships are most influential in shaping our ideas of God.” And of course, the most important influence is our parents.

But there is no formula to calculate the direction we will take from that influence – We may believe as our parents taught us to believe, or we could reject it and believe the opposite. We may see God as the sort of parent, mother or father, that we experienced, or sometimes we find ourselves picturing God as the opposite, making up for what our parents could not give us, or perhaps for their absence. The person with a strong disciplinary father might end up believing in the Authoritative God, or their response may be to seek comfort in their belief in a loving, nonjudgmental Benevolent God.

Some of us continue to believe what we learned in church or synagogue or mosque when we were young, finding it to be true and reinforced by our experience. For others among us, our experience teaches us that what we learned in as children does not hold up well in the harsh light of day, so that we reject those early teachings as fantasy or hypocrisy. We build our beliefs about the nature of reality, including those about the existence and nature of God, from our early learning and from that learning which continues; our developing beliefs are tempered by our interpretation, affirmed or undermined by our experience, and that is a very individualized process, with very individual results.

Even when we are clear about what we believe, which is not always the case, it may be difficult to communicate to others, even to those closest to us. Just as with so many other internal aspects of ourselves that we may try to communicate, it is nearly impossible to know exactly what another

person perceives and believes, even if they say words that sound exactly like the words we use ourselves.

Belief is a complex topic, and what we believe with our rational minds may be aligned with our experience and intuition, though sometimes there are some surprises there. One of the areas the researchers explored in their study was people's relationship with some force beyond the natural, beyond themselves, whether or not they called it God. Believers in an Authoritative or Benevolent God, a God directly engaged with the world, are very likely to have "felt called by God" and nearly a third of them report actually "hearing the voice of God speak" to them personally. Almost none of those who believe in a Critical or Distant God have heard God speak.

However, atheists and believers in a Distant God are the *most* likely to respond that they have "felt one with the universe," which many think of as a type of religious experience, a connection to something beyond the narrow boundaries of our human existence. The fact that one does not believe in God, particularly a personal, engaged and rule-making God, does not rule out an experience of connection to something larger than human knowing.

What does all this tell me? It tells me that we are collectively and individually very diverse in our beliefs, and that we may not be at all internally consistent according to standard ways of thinking. I have learned never to take anyone at face value until I know them more fully, and have a chance to explore with them their questions, their knowledge, their intuitions and yearnings. I return again and again to my commitment to this Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, this religion beyond belief, as my colleague Peter Morales likes to say, for all the reasons discovered in this study of religion in America. It is not only that each of us in this Sanctuary today, or any Sunday, may have a different belief about a God who is Authoritative, Benevolent, Critical or Distant, or perhaps the atheist's Un-God – it is that I know that you or I or anyone may just as likely to be a mystical atheist, or a nature-oriented theist, a Buddhist Universalist, a Catholic Unitarian – and that you may find it just as challenging and constraining to define and categorize your beliefs as I do my own. We can each be a bundle of apparent contradictions, no matter how settled we may seem to the outside world. And I love the contradictory bundles that we are.

What I look for in a religion, and what I strive for in my own life, is open honesty and integrity in our individual and collective diversity. My heart aches for my Lutheran friend who can never tell his family what he really believes. I do not accept secrecy or conformity in belief about the ultimate nature of the universe – rather, I revel in our diversity and the challenges it presents to be fully conscious in our lives. And at the same time, what I look for in a congregation is acceptance of our diversity, and the impulse to honor all our diverse beliefs. I look for true freedom of the pulpit and freedom of the pew, so that we may each speak in our own religious language, and hear the religious language of others with open ears and open hearts. My hope is that each Unitarian Universalist congregation, including this one, to be a safe place for pagan and humanist, theist and deist and atheist, mystic and scientific rationalist, to express their beliefs, use their language, and to be heard in love.

It is important what we believe; it is important that we are a people of faith, in commitment to our own way of honesty and integrity, to our open-hearted acceptance of all our searches for truth and meaning. As author Wayne Muller has said, faith as a way of being "is a place inside where we are in a companionable relationship with what is strong and whole within ourselves, where we listen to the still small voices of our heart and soul. When practicing a path of faith, we are in intimate conversation with what is deepest in our mind, heart and spirit."

So let us be a people of deep and abiding faith, whatever the nature of the God or Un-God in which we believe. Let us be committed to the principles to which we subscribe; let us be open to each other and to the diversity in the names we bring to that which is beyond our knowing. May we find both deeper knowledge and deeper reverence as we live our faith, this religion beyond belief, in the world. So may it be.

Sources:

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