

Draft

THE GOD PROBLEM

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson

January 16, 2011

Thank you, everyone, for being here today and as always special thanks for the music and all who prepare this service.

Last Sunday we had a good conversation about chalices and symbolism and a couple of people mentioned the question about God and the use of that language in this community. I'll be honest with you. I used to avoid God language whenever possible. I've wrestled with the concept of God since childhood and continue to do so. My thinking has evolved, however, and so I offer you these ideas today. Conversation later.

A couple of autumns ago I was invited to do a Sunday service in Whitefish, Montana where I've been a number of times over the years. I flew there and was given a car for the weekend. Then I decided it was so nice that I'd drive up to Glacier National Park for awhile. It was a beautiful autumn and I recall driving up into the park and getting leaves from trees. I'd had a wonderful dinner in Whitefish the prior night with a sinfully delicious dessert. I was happily remembering that chocolate dessert when I drove by a mega-church there in the valley. I remember the sign out front

that said **“You, sinner, get in here now. God sees you”** and I immediately felt a pang of guilt about the dessert...the rich, creamy, chocolaty dessert with damp rich filling.

So that got me to thinking as I prepared this service. I decided to count the number of times I saw or heard the word “God” in public settings in this area. Clemson is a somewhat traditional community in an area of the country that is well known for its religious convictions. God had to be somewhere and sure enough it was. It was on bumper stickers, billboards, church signs, said as swear words and much more. I lost track of God at about 228 times. We swim in a metaphorical sea of God language. And as much as many of us might struggle with the idea of God, the presence remains with us.

Therein lays a core difficulty for us as Unitarian Universalists of the 21st century. Do we avoid any songs in the hymnal that use the word God a lot? Do we simply ignore the whole question of whether God exists and simply focus on worldly concerns such as feeding the hungry, helping the homeless and healing the world of its many wounds? Might we dismiss the whole issue as supernatural wishful thinking?

I offer an alternative – that we see God as evolutionary imperative.

Our Seven Principles include the Fourth that says, “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” I would propose that open **and responsible search for truth and meaning** does not allow us to ignore a concept that has been a philosophical underpinning for nearly all of the world’s religious systems. I would further offer that we dispense with the concept of God at our own peril.

Dr. David Berenson articulated this difficulty in an essay on “A Systemic View of Spirituality” in the book “Addiction and Spirituality.” He writes that, **“Is it...easy to dispense with God, both the word and the reality it represents? People have certainly tried. Bateson spoke of the sacred, of “the pattern which connects...Eastern religions and proponents of the New Age speak of the Self, of Higher Self and of Higher Consciousness...none of these alternatives brings forth the awe, power, and majesty that have been associated with the word God and the presence it can evoke.”**

He goes on to express the healthy skepticism of many religious liberals and others with these words, **“For many, however, the word God does not call forth love, peace and joy but rather conjures up images of a smug piousness, of a guilty hypocrisy, of a syrupy-sweet tone of voice that may cover a vengeful intolerance, of convoluted dogma, and of boring**

sermons that may coexist with frenzied declarations of blind faith.”

Both of these statements probably resonate with us. Our whole lives have been in a society where the concept and identity of God is a given. We tend to wrestle with the traditional idea of God and that puts us into a minority who tend to end up here or are unchurched and still seeking..

This morning I'd like to begin to explore the question of God as mythos, as co-creation and as evolutionary impulse.

“God as mythos” is a central theme in Karen Armstrong's continuing exploration of the God idea. Armstrong is a former nun and the highly regarded author of such books as “The History of God”, and “The Great Transformation”. The reading this morning from her most recent book “The Case for God” echoes her own problem with the God of her childhood. The catechism of God as **“the Supreme Spirit, who alone exists of himself and is infinite in all perfections...”** was a beginners understanding of God and would not stand up to thoughtful scrutiny. She argues that the God of childhood was like the Santa Claus of childhood but still remains a powerful presence even into the adulthood of most people. Along the way to intellectual maturity, people became stuck on the notion of God-as-father.

She proposes that Western philosophy and theology have attempted to define God through rational logos rather than intuitive mythos. She writes that **“during the early modern period, Western people fell in love with an ideal of absolute certainty that, it seems, may be unattainable. But because some are reluctant to relinquish it, they have tended to over compensate, claiming certitude for beliefs and doctrines that can only be provisional.”** Armstrong then argues that the idea of God is inherently beyond our intellectual prowess. She suggests that any attempts to have God taking sides or that any holy book giving answers from God are absurd.

Armstrong suggests that the ancient meaning of mythos places the idea of God into the realm of ritual, initiation, intuitive insight from the arts, and expressions of love. We enter into a place where labels and names are inadequate. Mythos is not fable and old stories but ways to articulate Great Mystery.

So what do we UU's do here? One solution for us with the problem of God for us would be to delegate God to expressions of art, music, intuitive feeling, and ritual meaning. We see a sunset? There's God. We look at a baby's face smiling up at us? There's God. We hold hands with someone who is dying? God is in our hands and is the feeling we share.

A second way is to explore the nature of God as a co-creation process. This is generally called Process Theology and was the inspiration of Alfred North Whitehead in the early 20th century. Here's one way to define it: **“The traditional view of an immutable, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent deity is replaced by a God who is in process of evolving. [God] is constantly changing, learning, and evolving along with humanity. God affects history indirectly through gentle persuasion and not directly by coercion. God does not intrude directly in human activities; God does not violate the laws of nature by creating a miracle...”**

Here's a shorter way to say it: Basically, process theology suggests that humanity and God are co-creators of ever deepening consciousness through love and gentleness rather than supernatural coercion. The humanity that is evolving through states of awareness supports and aids the evolution of God to some end point of evolution.

This brings me to a third theory about the identity or nature of God. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said in the open words today that, **“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”** The notion of ‘spiritual being’ arises from theory of an Omega Point in the evolution of the human species in partnership with God's

evolution. This did not go well with the Catholic Church. His writings were banned though he was praised by the current pope this year for his thinking.

He argues that the end point of evolution is driven by the Law of Complexity/Consciousness. He argued that life tends to become more complex with time. As human beings continue to come into closer contact with one another, their methods of interaction continue to become more complex in the form of better organized social networks. That contributes to an overall increase in consciousness. Teilhard imagines a critical threshold, Omega Point, in which humankind will have reached its highest point of socialization and thus its highest point of consciousness. At this point consciousness will be transformed into full self-awareness. Buddhism would call this Buddha nature or full awakening at all levels.

So what might this mean to us this Sunday morning in Clemson, South Carolina?

I would propose that one of the most overused words in the English language is a key to our evolution into Godhood. Love is an essential glue to make it happen. We talk a lot about love in UU churches and try to practice it in all we do. We often fail to love fully but we give it our best. We have a set of promises here we hope will be true and authentic.

Most of our communities try to live by compassion and inherent goodness rather than believe ancient texts that condemn us for brokenness. We try to live from a different set of rules.

Here's an alternative rule we might take from Teilhard de Chardin in Phenomenon of Man: **“Love alone can unite living beings so as to complete and fulfill them...for it alone joins them by what is deepest in themselves [and each other]. All we need is to imagine our ability to love developing until it embraces the totality of [people] and the earth.”**

Imagine the visceral awareness and presence of Love reaching across all boundaries on earth because of a relentless evolution of God and human.

Imagine that love being empathy, compassion for self and others alike because it is the essential spiritual practice of life.

Imagine God being that essence of Love that our Universalist ancestors praised and prayed would bring all people to salvation.

Imagine Love being like a thread that binds together separate strands called living sentient beings called you and you, and all of us far and near.

Imagine God not as a being apart but a possibility waiting for our eyes to fully open, our ears to fully hear, and our hearts to become fully loving.

I remember a sign from a church I saw in Yakima before I came here that said ‘**you are the children of God and you have sinned.**’

Imagine if that sign said instead these words: “**you are the parents of God, so love deeply so that God can come to be.**”

Which sign can you imagine is true for us all?

It’s our choice now and always.

May we choose the God of our future well.