

Wrestling With My Take on God
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UCV

My take on “God,” or what one UU affirmation calls, “that transcending mystery and wonder” which renews us and “upholds life,” cannot possibly be the last word, or the best word. I speak from no privileged knowledge, no greater authority, no superior ethical life than anyone here. What I have to say arises from the experiences of one particular life. Each one of us embodies a whole individual world of aspiration, memory, hurt, strength, and thought. And if you’d been given the opportunity to be up here today, you too would be sharing a story of life-long encounters and insights concerning that three-letter word: G-O-D. That and all the marvel and mayhem associated with it.

The truth is whether we like or not, whether we are believers, agnostics, or atheists, we are thrown at birth into a God-obsessed, God-blessed, God-less, God-stressed, and God haunted world. A crazy quilt landscape full of contradictory, mundane and inspiring images, pictures and models of the world and of a cosmic order of things that both embraces and transcends the world. Those images and models are as various, benign, malignant, and fertile as are human cultures and individuals. No wonder then that we get Monty Python burlesques on god as a hapless blunderer or suffering from delusions of grandeur, or the humorlessness of Marxist dialectical materialism, as well as the sublimely transcendent in a Mozart Requiem Mass.

At some time or another, it will come at us in the form of a child’s question, the headlines of our national media, our studies of cultures, history, and the cosmos, in bouts with pain, sickness, or elation, in the aftermath of a natural disaster, or in the depths of a silent and restless night. Is there a God? What does that word and presumed reality that word conjures forth mean to us? What difference does it make for the way we understand the world in which we live and in the way we live out our lives? Any difference at all?

I have been a student of religious beliefs, institutions and history. I have been vexed and fascinated by the varieties of human religious experience. Vexed and fascinated by my own: of the many gods we worship, reject, and re-imagine. The institutions, arts and behaviors which those beliefs create and destroy. I have wanted to better understand the world in which I live and the imaginative cultural constructs we have created in order to make better sense of our natural environment and of our collective and individual histories. And I thought that the best place to do it was through the study of religion.

I have not been disappointed. What a parade of deities, rituals, art, ethics, and theologies! I have been a privileged bystander and participant in the cavalcade of religion. The sacred texts of many faiths. The histories. The reasoned attempts to explain and promote the faith.

And what I have come away thinking and feeling from those encounters is this. We create models and analogies for things we truly believe exist but that we cannot directly

observe. We cannot directly observe subatomic particles, but we infer from observation and equation that they exist. We can neither directly see divine beings nor a transcendent mystery, or force that pervades the cosmos and that elicits our wonder, fear and awe, but we also infer from observation and experience that they may exist.

Scientific and religious theories are maps of reality, not the terrain itself. They are useful intellectual and practical tools. They are convenient human constructs, calculating devices for connecting observations, making predictions, and suggesting modes of response. Models of elementary quanta, models of God, are not exact pictures of the world but useful fictions subject to refinement or elimination if and when more accurate data and experience compel us to change them.

Conceptual models of god have welled up from the creative and form-giving needs and insights of men and women in all our cultures and histories. Many-armed Shiva dances her awesome step of destruction, a dance that also makes possible the emergence and growth of new life. Awonawilona: the Maker and Container-of-All, in Zuni belief, formed the seed stuff of the two worlds: Mother earth and All-covering sky, and impregnated them with the substance of power and potentiality. There is Allah, transcendent and solitary in his majesty. Think of the petty intrigues, grandeur and heartless meddlings of the ancient Greek gods. Or of the rabbinic God wrapped in prayer shawl and tefillin reading Torah in a heavenly synagogue, and who laughs when defeated over an interpretation of Jewish law by earth bound rabbinical scholars. We know that concepts of the divine and models of god may come and go, only to be replaced by others. Many have had remarkable staying power.

We know too, that how we express these conceptual beliefs matter: both for good and woe. And that they have a remarkable resemblance to the cultures from whence they spring. In the medieval Christian world of monarchy and rigid hierarchy, no model of god was more universal or persuasive than that of an implacable male King, Lawgiver and Judge. A Divine Monarch who ruled the world and its destiny from the pinnacle of a great chain of hierarchy that proceeded from His throne and set every being below in its rightful place. To question that order, or seek change, defied the very scheme of things mandated by the Divine.

American slaves and North American women in the nineteenth century pulled that monarch down from his throne. For they conceived and worshipped another god altogether and thus changed the face of religion. American slaves imagined and experienced a god who suffered. A being who bent low to hear and who would respond with liberation for those in bondage. Women re-imagined god as universally compassionate and preserving of life, as more concerned for blessing and healing all of creation than for domination, unquestioned power, and stern judgment.

As well, the 19th and 20th centuries saw the culmination of several stands of scientific thought whose conceptual models seemed to banish the divine altogether from the world and the heavens. Cosmologists began to reveal to our startled view a universe expanding from an infinitesimally small knot of matter and energy that erupted from a titanic

explosion 15 billion years ago. And that continues to hurtle us and the stars to the very limits of a journey whose end no one knows. Gone is the parochial cosmos of Aristotle and Newton. And with it the certainties of a divine being keeping tabs on what's going on in the back yard.

Biologists, following in the vanguard of Darwin, swept away a view of nature and of nature's god who once and for all, according to design and purpose, set creatures into impervious, unchanging, and rigid orders of life. Another model has taken its place, one in which all forms of life have evolved from elementary organisms according to the mindless algorithms of natural selection. Far from the lamb and the lion lying peaceably down together, we see nature, as Tennyson memorably lamented, "red in tooth and claw," entities locked in competition whose sole aim is the propagation and preservation of their DNA. Gone is the benign watchmaker god of the 18th century rationalists.

And what are we left with? What does all of this mean when we pray "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul"?

"He restores my soul?" How can that be the case, a personal, transactional deity to whom I can pour out my soul in supplication and want? Again, He restores my soul? How can I say this when I know the harm done to girls and women, to boys and men, as a result of the hyper masculine attributes traditionally ascribed to divinity? Attributes used by religious and secular authorities to impose patriarchy, submission, and pitiless judgment.

"He restores my soul?" How can I believe and affirm this as the death toll from the recent tsunami surpasses 150,000? That AIDS is killing millions in Africa and throughout the world annually. And when six million Jews died at the hands of baptized executioners? When tens of millions perished in one century as a result of excesses of ideological zeal? I am left echoing the question raised by the same Psalmist nearly three thousand years ago: "Why dost thou stand afar off, O Lord/ Why dost thou hide thyself in times of trouble?" (Ps10) "For my days pass away like smoke. And my bones burn like a furnace." (Ps102)

"So what are we to conclude?" a character from an E. L. Doctorow novel asks. "We must conclude," he says, "that given the events of the twentieth century of European civilization, the traditional religious concept of God cannot any longer be seriously maintained." Indeed.

I don't think I have ever believed in an all-knowing and all-powerful god. The god with whom I grew up, I came to see as finite in strength. Modest in accomplishment. Quiet in expectation. Bound by the laws of nature and by our terrible freedom. A strange kind of divinity that makes room for our folly and our moments of accomplishment and grace. A kind of god the truth and meaning of which is largely in our hands to destroy or to construct.

But what's left? Is a finite, modest, oft-silent god even worthy of awe, reverence and

worship? Many would and do say no. And they resort to agnosticism and unbelief, and to anger. Or they, in their hundreds of millions, thrust all of this countervailing evidence aside, turn a blind eye to the violence and sorrow of nature and history, and the explanatory models of science. And instead, embrace traditional affirmations about god and divine providence. I cannot.

Again, I would ask you, what's left to us? No god? No transcendent mystery and wonder? No traditional, personal restorer of our souls? Let me tell you what's left for me. Three tentative experiences, that are also relatively fragile affirmations. They are aesthetic, epistemological, or having to do with knowledge as I experience it, and moral.

First, the aesthetic, or having to do with my emotional and perceptual response and affirmation. I cannot but experience a sense of awe and thanksgiving in my encounters with the manifold wonders of life. What do I make of that sense of mystery during the birth of an infant? Or the grave beauty of Southern Utah's red rock country in whose austere grandeur I walked two weeks ago with my family? Or why did I experience an acute sense of reverence each time I entered a classroom at the beginning of a semester? A sense of awe and purpose so intense that I wanted to remove the shoes from my feet, believing as I did and do that I stood on holy ground? My world is full of a mysterious and aesthetically rich and surpassingly pleasing wonder for things of which neither I, nor you, are their author.

As to the discoveries bestowed by insight and the hard and exacting discipline of thought, I am amazed and humbled at the deep ground of being and meaning which prodigiously and unendingly wells up and yields her fruit to my searching and supplication. The wonder is that when we embark on a journey of bringing something novel into the world, when we add to the storehouse of this frail world's beauty or discover its secrets, when we stop to do one act of justice and compassion, when we do it sincerely, modestly, she offers one revelation of truth and novelty after another to our most earnest entreaties. For those who ask and yearn for more spirituality in your lives and in this community, one, perhaps not completely welcome answer from me, is that the path and discipline of learning, reading, probing, and thinking, is not a merely mental, rational exercise. Rather, for me, it is a profoundly spiritual, worshipful endeavour, where I have learned at least as much about a god filled world, as by walking in the path of beauty and mystery through the aesthetic experience of art and nature. I respond with quiet affirmation to that ardent and revealing blaze kindled in me seemingly from beyond when I've asked for insight into the few questions of life whose answers really matter.

I would add to this, that in the last ten years I have found myself responding with a yes to those in the scientific community who marvel, not only at our vast, evolving, 15 billion year old cosmos, but with those who are also struck with amazement at "the remarkable conformity between our minds and the pattern, the nature, of the universe we inhabit." That of the infinite possibilities that exploded from that singular event eons ago, our cosmos evolved in just this particular way—"capable of producing systems of complexity sufficient to sustain conscious life." (John Polkinhorne) And that the large and small scale structures of galaxies and subatomic particles are characterized by a wonderful

order that has been expressed in concise and elegant mathematical terms. Again, a world whose fruitful potential has evolved from a relatively simple chemical flux to myriad, evolved molecular complexity that could be construed as expressive of conscious purpose. This is not proof, but it does tend to make what otherwise would be our dumb luck seem intellectually as well as aesthetically pleasing.

Finally, I take heart in the grave and hopeful moral vision and deeds of those we affirm as “prophetic women and men” who “challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Women and men, like Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothea Dix, and Norbert Capek for whom god is not the cause of things, whether good, evil, or blindly indifferent, not the cause but the response. The divine is to be felt, seen, and experienced in our response. And if there is a god, and the jury is still and will ever be out in deliberation, may it, she, and/or he be manifest and made real in each human liberating act, each human gesture of fidelity and kindness. It is truly within our hands, our minds, our artful response to life whether the divine will be embodied or banished from our world. The answers we give in response to the question of god and the divine, the models we suggest, the lives we live, really matter.

To those of us who are atheists. We can say “no” and in good faith, if we’ve thought things through and wrestled with it. And then we can point to the truly epic nature of the evolution of material reality. Whose poetry and grandeur can be as awesome and ennobling as any of the other creation myths of religion. But can we please say “no” modestly and without rancour toward theistic or earth centered spirituality and belief?

To those of us who are convinced theists and nature en-spirited folk, we can say “yes” and in good faith, if we’ve wrestled with it. And then we can point to the rational and affective accessibility of the cosmos or to the ways revolutionary change toward a more ethical world has taken place because of belief in a god restless for justice, peace, and source of the beautiful rhythms and complexity of the earth. But can we please say “yes” modestly and without rancour toward unbelief?

It is the strength and the challenge of this liberal religious tradition that we bring both our no and our yes, even our “I don’t know” here. We compel no doctrine upon each other. Because we are all wrestling with it. And we would have it no other way.

There is a story in the Hebrew Bible about how Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebecca, wrestled through the night with a mysterious stranger. Dawn was breaking and Jacob's adversary sought to escape. But Jacob would not let go, until his opponent blessed him. The unnamed opponent gave Jacob a new name, the name of Israel, because, he said in parting "you have striven with beings divine and human." As we wrestle with it, who knows?

May we too find our true name, discover who we are and become a blessing to the earth and those around us.