

**What We Talk About When We Talk About God**      **Rev. Kathryn Ellis**

Forrest Church suggests that we consider our beliefs about God:

(As) soon as we think we have something right side up we should experiment by flipping it over. Ralph Waldo Emerson said the same thing about theology, suggesting that we constantly vary our angle of vision, even our angle on God. If you believe in God, look again at what you believe in and cast it into question. Comfortable beliefs lack the element of surprise that invokes awe. So expand your frame of vision. Suspend your belief. Your God is probably far too small to be deserving of the name. By the same token if you doubt God's existence, the God you disbelieve in is probably even smaller. So take a chance, suspend your disbelief.<sup>i</sup>

When I was a psychotherapist, I tried to learn and understand how my client understood her life. I wanted to know what he had come to believe about himself, about other people and about the world, the universe. The simplest answer to the question that I pose, "What do we talk about when we talk about God?", is that we talk about ourselves. We talk about what is important to us. I wanted to know my clients' beliefs because what we believe matters. What we believe impacts how we experience the world, how we feel, how we live, how we function in the world. What we believe makes a difference every day.

And by the way, one of the reasons why I object to people saying "Unitarian Universalists can believe anything they want," is that you cannot believe something just because you want to believe it. A member of another congregation told me that she really wanted to believe in a God that was like an ATM or Santa Claus in the sky, but she could not believe in that God because it certainly did not fit her experience of reality.

Often, people want to believe in the comfort of an afterlife. Some of you may have wanted to believe what you were taught in the churches of your childhoods so that you could remain part of that community, but you found that you could not believe those teachings. You found that to be true to yourself and to your own experience you had to go.

For Unitarian Universalists, religion is experiential. It is direct and personal, part of our authentic experience of being alive. We do not accept a belief simply because we were taught that it was true or accept a belief because it is true for someone else. We experience life through our particular personality, through our own temperament. Our temperaments led us to different spiritual paths. Some of us focus on thoughtful analysis, seeking truth and justice; others focus on loving service to people. For some, contemplative spiritual practice is the way and others find their way through active work. Some have visions and some sing songs. Our differing temperaments are just that – differing. No one is more valid than another. Our diversity leads to varied experiences and diverse beliefs.

Twentieth century Unitarian minister, A. Powell Davies, put it this way, “Belief is many things and so is disbelief. But religion is something that happens to you when you open your mind to truth, your conscience to justice and your heart to love.”<sup>ii</sup> Our faith has consequences, and we are responsible for our own faith.

Thinking and talking about what you believe is of ultimate concern or of ultimate value, thinking and talking about God is theology. Whether we know it or not, we all do theology. The word theology comes from Greek words: logos meaning word, reasoning or talking, and theos meaning divine things, gods or ultimate values. So theology can be thought of as reasoning and talking about divine things or as talking about the ultimate good. What is the ultimate good for you? What is most worthy of your life’s deepest commitment? What is your ultimate orientation? How does that effect how you live?

Fred Muir, minister of the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Annapolis, wrote:

God is a word that we’ve come up with to describe what no other single word can. Just in that alone, the word is insufficient. The ancient Hebrews recognized this right off, and so they made their word for God unutterable. It was sacrilegious to say that word. So then they came up with another word that meant the word that no one can say.<sup>iii</sup>

I was reminded of the Exodus story in the Hebrew bible. When Moses met God in the burning bush and was instructed to go speak to the Pharaoh, Moses asked:

If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you” and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them. God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” (Exodus 3:13-14, NRSV)

God’s answer could also be translated “I will be who I will be” or “I will cause to be what I cause to be.” Doesn’t that explain it!

From the *Upanishads*: “He who thinks that God is not comprehended, by him God is comprehended; but he who he thinks that God is comprehended knows him not. God is unknown to those who know him and is known to those who do not know him at all.”<sup>iv</sup>

The first philosopher/ theologian that I read (on my own, in college) was Alan Watts. In his 1951 book, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, he wrote:

“(T)his ultimate something which cannot be defined or fixed can be represented by the word *God*. If this be true, we know God all the time, but when we begin to think about it, we don’t. For when we begin to think about experience we try to fix it in rigid forms and ideas. It is the old problem of trying to tie up water in parcels or attempting to shut the wind in a box.”<sup>v</sup>

Watts quoted an ancient Chinese poet:

*Plucking chrysanthemums along the East fence;  
Gazing in silence at the southern hills;  
The birds flying home in pairs  
Through the soft mountain air of dusk –  
In these things there is a deep meaning,  
But when we are about to express it,  
We suddenly forget the words.*<sup>vi</sup>

Words about God sometimes lead to misunderstanding. Traditional words can lead to the God many don’t believe in. This is the judging, controlling God of this saying: “If God is good, then he is not God. If God is God, then he is not good.” Let me repeat that. “If God is good, then he is not God. If God is God, then he is not good.”

Unitarian Universalist process theologian, Charles Hartshorne, wrote about this idea of God in “Six Common Mistakes about God.” Hartshorne’s six mistakes are the way that many people think about God. He states that atheism is a natural reaction to this way of thinking about God. Hartshorne’s six mistakes:

1. God is absolutely perfect and therefore unchangeable.
2. Omnipotence: God is all powerful, perfect in power.
3. Omniscience: Whatever happens is eternally known to God.
4. God’s unsympathetic goodness.
5. Immortality as a career after death.
6. Revelation as Infallible.<sup>vii</sup>

The ultimate value of this old theology is Power. Power and Control. Hartshorne quoted Whitehead, who said, “They gave unto God the properties that belonged to Caesar.”<sup>viii</sup> When your conception of power comes from emperors, kings and feudal lords, you may see God in that way: judgmental, arbitrary, and distant. This idea denies the existence of human freedom. It also denies God’s freedom and love.

Perfect literally means completely made or finished. Process theologians see God as evolving in response to the evolving world. A theme in the Hebrew Bible is that God in fact is constantly changing. Many of the characters of the Hebrew Bible argue with God, and sometimes the humans win the arguments. For example, after the flood, God promises Noah that he will never again flood the entire earth.

Hartshorne wrote, “From childhood, I learned to worship divine love. God’s power is simply the appeal of unsurpassable love . . . The beauty beyond all others is the beauty of love, that with which life has meaning, without which it does not.”<sup>ix</sup>

For me, out of my own experience, God encourages the good. God is divine love. I believe that we are each held in divine love and that this divine love wishes us to grow to be our own best selves. God is not arbitrary power. God is not a person. God is not

male. God is love. God is a verb. God encourages; process theologians say “lures.” We choose. We create. We can choose to welcome the stranger, care for the hurt, build community, and live in love. Rebecca Parker tells of Charles Hartshorne’s charge to her: “Be a blessing to the world.”<sup>x</sup> We can choose to bless the world.

As we seek God or the ultimate, each in our own way, we may come to know ourselves better. We may learn to be more authentic and effective in our communities. I want to encourage you to be conscious of your own theology and how it impacts your life. Tell us about the God you do or don’t believe in! May we be open to learning from and about others as they talk about God, in whatever way they talk about God.

Whatever is your ultimate good, ultimate value, ground of being, that mysterious something beyond us, let us march and sing and dance in that light. May you be a blessing to the world. May you live in blessing. Amen

---

<sup>i</sup> Church, Forrest. *Lifecraft: The Art of Meaning in the Everyday*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000, pp70-71

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted in John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church. *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, p.37.

<sup>iii</sup> Muir, Frederic John. *Heretic’s Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals*. Annapolis, MD: Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, 2001, p.96

<sup>iv</sup> Watts, Alan. *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1951 p. 150.

<sup>v</sup> Watts, Alan. *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1951, p. 55.

<sup>vi</sup> Watts, Alan. *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. New York: Pantheon Books, 195, p. 113.

<sup>vii</sup> Hartshorne, Charles. “Six Common Mistakes About God” in *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. State University of New York Press, 1984, pp. 1-3.

<sup>viii</sup> Hartshorne, Charles. “Six Common Mistakes About God” in *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. State University of New York Press, 1984, p. 8.

<sup>ix</sup> Hartshorne, Charles. “Six Common Mistakes About God” in *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. State University of New York Press, 1984, p. 9.

<sup>x</sup> Parker, Rebecca Ann. *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*. Boston Skinner House Books, 2006, p. 161.