

“Dreaming with Zeus and Hera:  
Toward a Unitarian Universalist Theology”  
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Have you ever been asked, “Do you believe in God?” I know I have. I expect that some of you would answer, “No, certainly not.” Others of you would answer, “Yes, I do; I do believe in God.” And still others would answer, “I’m not sure; maybe God exists, or maybe not,” or perhaps you’d say, “it depends on what you mean by ‘God,’” or perhaps, “that’s not a very important question.”

My mother asked me this question once. Bravely, or perhaps disrespectfully, I acknowledged that I did not.

This morning I’d like to share with you my current thoughts on the God question, on the “G” word. I do this not to convince you that my approach is the right one for you. We have in Unitarian Universalism room for theological diversity. But I hope that a few of this morning’s ideas may be new to you, and possibly even thought provoking.

John Buehrens, the former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, reports that a British biologist “was once asked what, after a lifetime of studying creation, he had been able to conclude about the nature of the Creator.” “God,” he replied, “seems inordinately fond of beetles.” [John A. Buehrens, *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals* (Boston: Beacon Press: 2003), p. 43]

If triangles had a god, according to a Yiddish proverb, it would have three sides. [Arthur Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Bethesda: Alban Institute, 1999), p. 36]

Unitarians, it was often said in the past, believe in one God – at most. Today, such a statement would be insufficient to describe our theological diversity.

What one might say about God cannot be exhausted in 20 minutes. I may not leave you with firm conclusions this morning, perhaps just with what appear to be random thoughts. But for those of you who want the bottom line, when I was preparing a few years back for my interview with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, I characterized myself, in one of the several essays that the committee requires, as a “post-humanist metaphorical theist.” Now, if you’re not sure what that means, it’s OK: I’m not sure either.

### **Ontological Argument**

Some have argued that God exists by necessity.

St. Anselm was a Benedictine monk of the late 11th and early 12th centuries. His so-called ontological proof is still worthy of discussion. [Saint Anselm, *Proslogium*, in *Basic Writings*, tr. S.N.

Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1961), chapters 2-4.] Very roughly, Anselm's argument goes something like this:

- (1) God, by definition, is that greater than which nothing can be conceived.
- (2) Something that exists is greater than something that does not exist. For example, an elephant is certainly greater than the idea of an elephant.
- (3) Therefore, God exists.

His argument is extremely clever, but unconvincing emotionally and logically flawed, since existence is not a predicate. That is, when you say something exists, you're not describing it. Therefore, the second step of his argument is invalid. [See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 75 (citing counter-arguments by Kant and Russell); see also Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, tr. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 10-16 (on inadequacy of proofs of the existence of God by Aquinas and others).]

### **Tillich *et al.***

More contemporary theologians have taken a different approach to showing that God exists by necessity. For example, John Storey [*Singing the Living Tradition*, hymn #2], states, with rhyme and meter, that –

what we take most earnestly  
is our living Deity.

Our true God we there shall find  
in what claims our heart and mind,  
and our hidden thoughts enshrine  
that which for us is Divine.

That's from our hymnal, number 2. According to Storey's poetry, God exists by definition. God is "what we take most earnestly;" God is "what claims our heart and mind." Or as the great 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, put it, God is our ultimate concern.

God, [according to Tillich,] is the answer to the question implied in our finitude; God is the name for that which concerns us ultimately. This does not mean that, first, there is a being called God, and, then, the demand that we should be ultimately concerned about God. It means, rather, that whatever concerns us ultimately becomes god for us. [F. Forrester Church, ed., *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich* (New York: MacMillan, 1987), p. 11, edited]

If you find the traditional concept of God no longer useful, the approach of Storey and Tillich is worth considering.

Developing a concept of God is difficult. Theologians typically say that we cannot really know anything about God, that God is a mystery beyond any human attempt at description or understanding, that the only way to talk about God is through metaphor. This is not a recent discovery.

Some of the ancient Stoics “read Homer’s poems allegorically, taking gods like Zeus and Hera to represent elements of the natural universe.” [Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 117]

The Secret Book of John, an early Christian writing that was declared heretical, explains – I’m quoting Elaine Pagels here, and the account of the Stoics was hers, too – the Secret Book of John explains that “the creator-god pictured in Genesis is himself only an anthropomorphic image of a divine source,” a “God beyond God.” [Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, p. 166]

Before I try to reconstruct the concept of God, I want to address two attributes traditionally ascribed to God.

### **Two Attributes – 1. Able and Willing to Intervene**

God is often characterized as omnipotent, as all powerful. One approach to this is to ask, what could that mean? What does it mean to be omnipotent? If omnipotence means anything, I would suggest that omnipotence implies having the ability to intervene in the world.

Indeed, I would go one step further. Omnipotence implies not only the ability to intervene in the world, but also actual intervention. A god able to intervene, but who chooses not to, is irrelevant for humanity, at best.

Consider the question, then, *Does God intervene in the world?* For some, the natural starting point in the search for an answer to this question would be the Bible, with its accounts of multiple interventions, culminating in the resurrection of Christ.

But I would start from where I am. What would an intervention by God look like today? How would we recognize such an intervention? What comes first to mind is an event so unlikely, so awe-inspiring, that we can have no other explanation than that it is God’s direct action.

The problem with this is that we don’t have such events any more, if we ever did. When was the last one? Moreover, while some would respond to such an event with an acknowledgment that God has made God known, others would insist that there is a natural explanation, but that we just can’t figure it out.

A second candidate for divine intervention is a good thing that happens that we ascribe to God’s providence: a war avoided, a cure for AIDS discovered, the reversal of global warming. But attributing such events to God doesn’t add anything to more natural explanations.

And then there is the problem of bad things, and the problem of things that are good for some people but bad for others, and the problem of things that are good for people but bad for badgers, and so on. This leads us to questions of how we look at the world. Is God pulling the strings? Does God provide a safety net to head off disaster?

Here's a little story from my life. For several years, back in the 1970's, I lived in the Ontario Apartments, a cooperative apartment building in Washington, D.C., owned and run by its residents. It had an elected board of directors, but I had the idea that behind the scenes was the power structure of wise elders, whose mostly invisible guiding hand would assure that nothing went too wrong. Within a few years of my arrival at the Ontario I was elected to the board and then to the presidency. I soon realized that the wise elders' guiding hand was a figment of my imagination. For better or worse, *we*, the elected leaders, were in charge.

Nevertheless, one part of me still has retained the faith, at some level, that something, some invisible guiding hand, has seen us through: that the world would not end in nuclear war or accident, that the Cuban missile crisis would not start World War III, that we would not irretrievably kill the environment, that I would reach old age. But intellectually I realize that there is no one up there pulling the strings. There is only us. To the extent that God intervenes in the world, *we* are God's hands.

The wonders of nature, to move on to the third kind of event that may provide evidence of divine intervention, seem to cry out, affirming God's handiwork. As Joseph Addison paraphrased Psalm 19, "The spacious firmament on high, with all the blue ethereal sky, and spangled heavens, a shining frame, their great Original proclaim." [Joseph Addison's paraphrase of Psalm 19, hymn #283 in *Singing the Living Tradition*] (That's hymn number 283 in our hymnal, by the way.) Yes, the world is a wonderful place. But, no, all this does not demonstrate that God intervenes in the world.

## **Two Attributes: 2. Personal**

A second feature commonly attributed to God, is that God is a personal God.

*Is God personal?* A personal god is a god with consciousness, with self-consciousness and self-awareness, a god capable of paying attention to what goes on in God's creation. Indeed, such a God would be capable of paying attention simultaneously to all that is going on, to all thoughts and prayers. Not only capable, but presumably interested and engaged. Here, clearly, is the anthropomorphic god, created in our own image, only extrapolated and perfected: the parent in the sky.

I always could rely on my mother to be interested in my accomplishments, no matter how minor, obscure, or boring. I could phone her; I could mail her things; she would care. My mother is dead now. Has God taken over for her?

Or perhaps now our image of God is the big computer in the sky, instantaneously and simultaneously performing universal Google searches on every conceivable topic.

No, I do not think that God is like that. God must be *something else*. Or perhaps we should just discard all this God talk and move on.

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I'm reminded here of a television commercial. I haven't actually seen it myself, but I heard it described on NPR. It's an Ikea commercial.

On the screen is an abandoned desk lamp, outdoors, in the rain. The voice says, "Give up that old lamp, it's only a thing, it doesn't have feelings. Find a new lamp at Ikea" Just as our rational voice may tell us, "Give up that outmoded concept, God, and move on."

But discarding that old desk lamp may not be so easy for us:

That was the lamp I used all through college.

That was the lamp that my daughter studied by in high school.

That was my father's lamp, at his desk, where he paid the bills.

That was my ex-husband's lamp, the no-good so-and-so.

Let's not toss out that old lamp quite so quickly. Or God, either. Let's acknowledge the power, the meaning, the memories that the word "God" has for us.

### My Approach

Our attempts to describe God, to confine God cannot succeed. On the one hand, God is our creation, a human creation. What kind of God can that be? How can we possibly be satisfied with a God that we created ourselves?

Yet, on the other hand, God is the mystery beyond all mysteries, the totally unknown and unknowable. What satisfaction can we receive from a God that is totally beyond our understanding?

An image may help: *the square root of minus one*. Mathematics is a human creation; yet the subjects of mathematics are *out there*, waiting to be discovered. Negative one does not have a square root: no number multiplied by itself yields -1. Yet the square root of minus one is an immensely useful concept. God is something like that: a human creation, but real; impossible, but useful.

Here is how I think of God. I offer you three metaphors.

(1) God is the creator, the mystical answer to the question, Why is there something rather than nothing – an answer that is not really an answer. God is the creative force that is omnipresent and eternal. The flip side of this idea is that God is the destroyer, the destructive force, which may someday answer the question (but there will be no one to ask it), Why is there nothing rather than something? Life and death are part of the same system; they are partners.

(2) God is love. God is the sum of human love. God inspires us to love. Wherever love is exhibited, God is there. But God is also present when love is absent; God is with those who suffer; God suffers with us; God even dies with us.

(3) God is truth, knowledge, and wisdom. God is the sum of wisdom, with nothing forgotten. God inspires us to greater wisdom, growing as we grow. But God is there as well where knowledge is impossible or irrelevant – in the unknowable, in the beautiful.

These thoughts were in part inspired by the classroom. One of the requirements of my Systematic Theology class at Wesley seminary was that I write a paper describing my own theology.

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But more important than the classroom is the hospital room.

When I was serving as student chaplain at Jeanes Hospital in Philadelphia a few summers ago, I would, from time to time, pray with patients or with their families. None of the patients were Unitarian Universalists. There were many Catholics and Jews, and Protestants of various sorts. It was not a time for theological discussion or for footnotes. As I saw, it was my role to give prayers that would be meaningful and helpful for the patients and their families, but prayers that at the same time would not compromise my intellectual integrity. It was not necessary for me to explain exactly what I meant by *God* or to warn them when I was speaking metaphorically.

I avoided saying that what had happened to them was God's will.

I avoided promising that God would fix things for them, either in this life or in the next.

I did tell them that God loved them.

I did tell them that God was with them in their suffering.

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To conclude, let me share with you something that's been puzzling me. As reported in the New Testament, one day Jesus was asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Which is the most important? Jesus responded, faithfully endorsing the words of Moses, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." [Mark 12:30 // Matt. 22:37, Luke 10:27; quoting Deut. 6:5] My problem is, I'm at a loss to know what it means to love God. How would one go about it?

The best I can think of for how one might go about loving God is to try to love humanity, to try to love and preserve God's creation. Is there something more, something I'm missing?

Actually, if I were so inclined, I could claim that my response comes straight from the Bible. Here is how the Prophet Micah, from the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, explains our duty to God:

6 ¶ "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8, NRSV)

Here's how Matthew, the New Testament gospel writer, puts it

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matt. 25:34-40, NRSV)

More simple, the First Letter of John explains:

20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1 John 4:20, NRSV)

Some people, apparently, think that there is more to loving God than what Micah, Matthew, and John suggest. But if there is, you'd think I would have learned that, during my six years at Wesley Theological Seminary. Maybe I missed class the day it was covered. Or maybe there was an elective that I failed to take.

With that I'll stop. I would leave you, not with answers, but with questions: What is your concept of God? How has your concept of God changed since you were nine? Is *God* a useful concept? What do *you* think it means to *love* God?