

“Are UUs Atheists?”

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If you came here today expecting me to unlock the secret of whether or not God exists, you are in the wrong place. That subject is pretty big and we may not have time to address it today.

Of all the controversies among us Unitarian Universalists, surely the God-question is the most significant and consequential. We ceaselessly ask, *Does God exist?* and then we ask, *Does it make a difference to us here in this place?*

When I tell people that I am a Unitarian Universalist, they typically do not know what that is. As I try to explain, they say impatiently, “Well, it really doesn’t matter, *as long as you believe in God.*” that seems to be the definition of religion for most people in the world. Is that the bottom line? Is that what religion is about? Interestingly, most people seem to think it is.

Over and over throughout my life especially as a UU minister, I have responded by declaring, “That’s not the question. Believing in God has little to do with being a Unitarian Universalist.” My listeners are always astonished at that statement, for to most people “God” and “religion” are synonymous.

This curious debate is not only between non-UUs and UUs, it is between UUs themselves. I have heard many of us question the existence of God, while simultaneously questioning whether Unitarian Universalism is even an authentic religion.

This controversy flared up a few months ago on the pages of our denominational magazine, the *UU World*. On the inside cover is an advertisement for a group called the Freedom from Religion Foundation, whose byline says, “A 501 (c)(3) non-prophet (spelled prophet) association of atheists & agnostics working since 1978 to keep state and church separate.” Here are some of their signs which are designed to be placed in public areas, including on buses:

“Clarence Darrow: “I don’t believe in God because I don’t believe in Mother Goose.” Butterfly McQueen, “As my ancestors were freed from slavery, I am free from the slavery of religion.” And more from Mark Twain, Kathryn Hepburn, and Emily Dickinson and others.

When this issue came out there was a firestorm of anger over why the *UU World* accepted this ad, which obviously confuses the difference between religion and theism. The truth is that Unitarian Universalism *is* a religion, especially in the truest and most accurate sense of the word. Folks throughout the denomination who know that and who think of themselves as religious were outraged. I am one of those folks. I personally believe that religion and God are not the same thing, and I am dismayed to think that our denominational magazine would by an ad from a group that does thing they are synonyms.

Subsequent issues of the *UU World* were filled with letters to the editor decrying the ad. The whole brouhaha culminated when the editor in chief of the magazine wrote an apology for accepting the ad, since it was clearly misrepresentative of Unitarian Universalism.

What is it that is representative of Unitarian Universalism? Why are we together? What are we doing? Is it because of our belief in God or our unbelief in God.

It must be said that many UUs think of themselves as atheists and agnostics. That is, belief in God is not the defining element of being a Unitarian Universalist. And, there are many folks who think of themselves as Theists and even as Christians.

All this diversity means that we as a religious movement cannot be defined theologically. Our definition centers on a *covenant*—a sacred agreement—we make with one another to live our lives according to certain *values*, which are expressed in our Principles and Purposes statement (written in your order of service every week). If we believe anything, it is that *how people live* is vastly more important than *what they believe*.

“Deeds, not creeds” is the famous summation of this argument. So the issue is, How do we live our lives? not What do we believe? We actually encourage folks to develop their own belief system. In our most successful adult religious education program called, Building Your Own Theology, folks are asked to think about what they believe and write it down in what we call a “credo” (“I believe”) statement. If you

believe in God, even a personal God as in Jesus, you are welcome to make that part of your personal belief system. If you do not find the concept of God helpful, you can say that out loud in your credo statement and you will be supported.

As always, the words we use or do not use are the center of it all. One of the larger challenges we liberal religious people face is to seek to understand what those words mean. What is an *atheist* (not-God)? An *agnostic* (doesn't know)? A *theist*? A *Christian*? A *believer*? A *humanist*? A *skeptic*? And, of course, *Unitarian Universalist*? My great desire is that in this place, here at Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church, you can be a Christian UU, a Jewish UU, a Buddhist UU, a Humanist UU. You can be an atheist here or an agnostic or a skeptic. And you are welcome, wherever you are on your life's journey.

We spoke of these things recently in the sermon about Doubting Thomas, my patron saint. A key point was trying to understand what it means *to believe*. And, what it means to doubt, to be skeptical, and to think about these huge concepts while encouraging one another to grow in our understanding.

The search for truth and meaning goes on in the liberal religious tradition. This is a very good thing, for the long and winding road of our individual and communal life journeys truly can find a home here.

The reality of this discussion finally comes around to a basic equation: the relationship of what people believe with how it is they live their lives.

MARK TWAIN STORY (see below)

What about the idea that what we *say* we believe we must also be responsible for? What about our responsibility as the consequence of our theology or non-theology? What about our personal responsibility as our the essential element of our human will to believe what we must believe, to do what we want do. What is our responsibility to live this way?

And the issue of *freedom* comes forth. It is about the human freedom to make decisions and we take that freedom and we put it up against something like God, for instance, and we know that God *also* must be responsible for things that are happening in the world.

That means we can now speak of the idea of *responsibility*. You know, whether or not you believe in an all-powerful (omnipotent) who is responsible for everything that happens, including all our human activity—good and bad—or whether you believe you are personally in control of your life in all its variations, *someone* has to be held accountable.

Whether you believe in the power of God to direct human affairs, or if you believe in the power of human freedom and responsibility, you must nevertheless address the idea of responsibility.

It turns out that we can't say, God made me do a certain thing, even though we do say, God made me shoot that person, God told me to put on this bomb around my waist and walk into the marketplace in Baghdad. God told me to do that. I am then shifting the responsibility for my own actions over to God.

The question then becomes, Who's running the show? Who's in control? (Control is, as you know, a very important issue for us Unitarian Universalists.) You've got God up in heaven, or maybe on the roof of the Sistene Chapel, and God is directing things to happen around the world. And it just doesn't seem that God is responsible for his actions; or maybe it is that he doesn't take responsibility.

And God is directing things that are happening around the world, but is he taking responsibility. This may be the central issue at stake in the entire God question. We do not like the notion that something, and especially that some *One* is in control of our lives. We believe that individuals must take responsibility for their own lives. We do not believe that you can say that God made you do this or that thing; I am shifting my responsibility for my actions over to God. Even though we do say, God told me to do to shoot that person, God told me to strap this bomb around my waist and walk into the marketplace in Baghdad and ignite it. Got told me to do this in order to further what it is that I believe about God. And I can read it from the Scriptures.

And we don't think you can even say that the Devil made you do it.

This belief in individual freedom to make the connection between what we say we believe and what we actually do is very important to us. It is a significant element in the Principles and Purposes, which we affirm and promote. We want to take our freedom and run with it, and as we run we hang on dearly to the

values which we believe will make our lives better and even to make the world a better place. It is our human prerogative to choose what we want to do.

And there is a corollary part of this human need. Sometimes when we think about God, we don't think God is doing a very good job in his control of things. We're mad at our old-time God. We are angry because God did not turn out to be what everyone was saying, and that, in fact, God is often not a very nice fellow at all! I remember a psychiatrist friend explaining to me the reason God does not have very many friends is because of the way he treats his friends. With friends like that...

I think I can remember the first time I thought, if I were God, I would not act like God does. You know, like sending people to hell forever and stuff like that. Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever wondered, as William Sloane Coffin wondered, "why is it that God does not seem very *Christ-like*"?

An illuminating exercise is to ask yourself seriously *what you would do if you were God*. In other words, if you were in charge of the universe, what would you do? Well, I know for sure, that I'd have lots of flowers and beautiful spring days and magnificent Cascade-type, snow-covered mountains. But I am not sure what I would do with the troublemakers—there are always troublemakers—if I were in charge. I'm pretty sure I would have put the hiatus on mosquitoes, and maybe even rattlesnakes.

But what would I do with Hitler? And what *about* tornadoes and floods and earthquakes? Have you ever noticed how they call that kind of catastrophe an "*act of God*"? Would I *act* like that if I were God?

The \$10 word for this is *theodicy*, a term first introduced by the great philosopher Leibnitz to characterize the topic of God's government of the world in relation to the nature of humanity. The idea is "the justification of God's goodness and justice in view of the evil in the world." You know, why does God allow things like tornadoes and floods and Karl Rove, etc.?

I think it is interesting that in Western culture we have tended to anthropomorphize God, make God sort of human, while in truth, our traditional picture of God is one of the most *inhuman* concepts imaginable.

The answers to these questions, especially as they pertain to the notion of evil in the world, and how it is to face that fact, are such that many of us have chosen to bypass them. We have decided that God is not the problem, or at least God is not the problem that we humans can have any control over. For that vast majority of evil which happens in the world, that is, the evil that human beings do to one another, that's about *us*. We make that happen. The tragic truth is that our motivation for doing evil too often comes right alongside our personal belief in some kind of God. And we even say, God told me to do this despicable deed.

We can have control, however, over much of our lives. If we preach and practice the principles of human dignity, for instance, we can possibly prevent a Hitler from happening. If we build a church and a society upon the principles of justice and freedom, we can possibly eliminate much of the human misery so prevalent in the world.

We have chosen to say that God's existence may be irrelevant, since we have the responsibility to do what we know we must in order to deal with the human condition. Some of us say, Go ahead and think about God anyway you wish. But there are other, more important and more relevant things to think about; namely, to think about human beings and their existence and their welfare, and to think about humanity in its relationship with the cosmos, the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, and its existence and its welfare so far as we can influence it.

We've decided to be practical people. There is a lot of work to be done and we are tired of waiting for God or something to do it. For many of us, the question of the existence of God is not the question.

In the meantime, however, we must go about the business of building the world in the best ways we know we can. It is our time now, to go about the business of creation. It is our place now. It is our responsibility now. From that moment in time we move on.

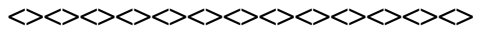
And, now, from the responsive reading we read at the beginning of the service:

*We dare not fence the spirit,
nor close off the sincerity of conversation
with which souls must meet in religious association.*

*As others have their ways of religion,
so do we have this faith;
and, in honest difference,
we order our lives together.*

Amen.

At the end, it may turn out to be a dance. So let us sing that very sentiment in the song in our hymnal, “Let It Be a Dance” on page 311.



Benediction:

“Don't ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” (—Howard Thurman)