

WISDOM CIRCLES
December 2013
What is my relationship to God?

Humanist UUs don't feel that that word is relevant at all. The old joke is that in some UU congregations the only time you hear the word 'God' is when the custodian hits his thumb with a hammer. Other UUs find the word meaningful to the point where they could not talk about their faith without using the word 'God.'

In her brilliant book *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong points out that, until recently, it is only in the Christian West that God has been seen as an object among other objects, separated from the world. In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Judaism and Islam it has been recognized that God cannot be explained. The divine is a mystery. We know God by experiencing God. Ever since a tortured Augustine's notion of original sin, however, God has been a problem in the West as much as a comfort and a sustainer.

Horrible things said and done in the name of God: hatred of other religions and their adherents; the demonizing and dehumanizing of gays and lesbians; the subordination of women; and religious wars to name just a few. Lest we are tempted to blame all of these evils on religion, however, it is important to remember that people have been killed in the name of political ideology too.

Almost all UUs reject the idea of God as a male figure with a white beard, an anthropomorphic God separate from his creation. Many UUs reject the whole notion of a God at all. They do so in name of reason, but their thinking is not always rational. Let me explain.

There is no question that there is an ultimate reality. The question becomes: is this ultimate reality interested in my welfare or is it indifferent? Some thinkers believe that the individual answers to that question are a matter of temperament. Some research by James Fowler of Emory University seems to indicate that the kind of bond we had with our earliest care giver in our earliest months has to a lot to do with deepest convictions about God in later life. There is no definitive proof but it is an intriguing question.

For me, the mystical conception of God, embraced by people of all faith and none, and in all times, makes the most sense. This understanding holds that divine identity and our deepest self is one and the same. The Hindus have an expression, "thou art That". Lots of names would fit, 'Great Mystery', 'the Force', 'the Absolute', 'the Oversoul', and 'Ultimate Reality', for example. UU theologian Henry Nelson Wieman had an unwieldy but quite accurate definition: God is that reality, perfect adjustment to which yields the greatest human good. Two theological terms are used to describe this concept of God. The first is "pantheism." This is the belief that God is in all of existence and that the totality of existence is God. "Panentheism" is the idea that God is not only all of existence but all that could possibly exist. In other words, God is time and space and beyond time and space.

Abstract ideas of God like those excite and enlighten some people and leave others cold. For many, it is hard to relate to God as ultimate reality or the unmoved mover. Hinduism has long recognized that different temperaments need different aspects of God to relate to. For some, ultimate reality means the impersonal lawfulness of the universe. For others, there is a great feeling of intimacy with what they experience as God. Jesus called God, "daddy." From the Hindu perspective all paths to realization.

I used to talk about God a lot more, but more and more I have come to respect reticence of many UUs to talk about it. God is finally a mystery. But like other mysteries, such as love, evil, death, and nature, it doesn't mean we can learn nothing. We can't know all, because the creation cannot fully know the creator. We are flirting with idolatry to be attached to any one definition of God. We run the danger of idolatry just talking about God. There is a Zen story about the moon and the finger pointing at the moon. We humans want to grab the finger because we can't grab the moon. I find myself talking about God less and less and talking about what I see as the concrete manifestations of God in our lives more and more. Justice. Mercy. Love. Compassion. Exuberant beauty. Experiences of oneness with others and with nature. Perhaps instead of arguments about concepts, in our Wisdom Circles we can talk about our deepest experiences.

Spiritual Exercise

This month our spiritual exercise is to draw two pictures of God. You can use any medium you want to create these pictures. If you absolutely must, you may use words. The first picture is a picture of God from your past that you no longer believe in. The second picture is meant to depict your current idea of God/what you ultimately trust/the ground of being/that which is the greatest that you can imagine. If you feel comfortable doing so, share the pictures with your Wisdom Circle.

Questions for Reflection

It has been said that God is not a thing but an experience. What experience of the holy have you had?

If you have had the experience of giving up a long held idea of God, reflect on what led to that decision. Did you feel grief? Relief? What was the experience like?

Words of Wisdom

The atheist staring from his attic window is often nearer to God than the believer caught up in his own false image of God.

- Martin Buber

In music, in the sea, in a flower, in a leaf, in an act of kindness...I see what people call God in all these things.

- Pablo Casals

Tell me what is God? He is the breath inside the breath.

- Kabir

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional you have learned about God, perhaps even the word itself.

- Paul Tillich

God, to me, it seems, is a verb, not a noun, proper or improper.”

- Buckminster Fuller

I fear one day I'll meet God, he'll sneeze and I won't know what to say.”

- Ronnie Shakes