

“A More Interesting God”

Rev. Barbara H. Gadon

First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

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For the past few weeks, it has felt to me that Americans have a God problem. I'm not talking about the does-God-exist debate, between the self-proclaimed New Atheists and others who do believe in God, both feeling free to call the other an idiot. Nor am I talking about spiritual materialism – where we're encouraged to consume aesthetically pleasing spiritual products and experiences, like reading and watching “Eat Pray Love” in both paperback and movie forms, perhaps picking up a movie-themed tote bag or (shudder) some Julia Roberts prayer beads. These just make me cranky.

This God problem is different. This is more troubling. This is a national argument, and it's a playground argument - over whose God is the right God, or the real God, or the true God. And by implication, who are God's beloved people, and who are not. You think this argument goes away, when we can actually elect a president who is a Catholic, or when Jews can live wherever they want and even become president of DuPont. Or when a president can still get elected and get things done, despite the 18% of Americans who are convinced he's a Muslim. (He's not, by the way, we've got proof on this one.) But it's here again. The playground argument. I thought we were better.

To the framers of the debate, if you could call it that, the players are easily divided: it's Muslims vs. everybody else. Are you as puzzled as I am, as to why so many people can't tell the difference between a mosque and a community center? Who can't tell the difference between Ground Zero and two blocks away? Who can't tell the difference between terrorists and an Imam and his wife who have a track record of speaking out against terrorism and organizing interfaith dialogue? The atmosphere of the debate has become threatening to the point that even after his first bold statement about religious freedom, my very favorite president withdrew.

Now I get it. It's politics. The political expression for whomping up fear and enmity – based on reality or not – is called “firing up your base”, or “throwing red meat.” My question is, why are so many people chomping on this red meat that is so obviously rotten? Even with responsible journalism like the AP article from last Thursday that clearly contrasts the claims about this community center vs. the facts. Even with Barack Obama's longstanding commitment as a Christian and member of Trinity UCC Church in Chicago. Facts don't seem to matter. One reporter said that people insist on believing these things anyway because they identify more with the people who speak these lies than the people who debunk them. Plain and simple. I am choosing a side and sticking to it. It's a playground argument. And since the argument is about religion, they are also saying, I am choosing the God that suits me. I am deciding who God loves and doesn't love. I'm bending God to my cynical purpose. It's a God problem.

The good news is, God is bigger than this. God is always bigger than what any one person or any one religion can imagine. If you want to know where to start describing what Unitarian Universalists can agree on about God, it's right here. We base our faith primarily on

human experience, rather than a holy book or a divine savior. When we speak of God, our ideas are based on human experience of God. And we insist that all human experience counts. I've been in churches – nice churches – where the pastor will rejoice in being with “the people of God”. The liturgy will exclaim, “We are the people of God!” I always think, so if you stepped outside the church, the people you see out there *aren't* the people of God? That God says, “Just go through those doors right there, and you're back in. *Those* are my people.” It's like that wayside pulpit that says, “Sitting in church doesn't make you a good person any more than standing in your garage makes you a car.” It takes a little more. I'm not saying we Unitarian Universalists are exempt from thinking that we have THE answer. We might not say we are the one true faith, but we sometimes think we've got the only sane and reasonable way. I'm not saying we're exempt from this kind of boasting. I'm saying that when we succumb to this way of thinking, we're not really practicing our religion.

“I am the Self that dwells in the heart of *every* mortal creature,” the Bhagavad-Gita describes Brahman, one of the most powerful among the gods. “I am the divine seed of all lives.” Either God is present in each of us, and in all the world, or it is not big enough to be called God. As Forrester Church writes, “God is not even God's name. God is our name for a power that is greater than all and yet present in each: the life force, the Holy, Being itself.” (“Universalism: A Theology for the 21st Century”, UU World, Nov-Dec 2001) A power that is greater than all, and yet present in each. The theological term for this is “panentheism” – panENtheism. You are probably more familiar with the word “pantheism”. Pantheism means God *is* all things. Panentheism, with that extra “en” in the middle, means something else. It means God is IN all things. It's a way to describe a spirit, a presence, a force - that is part of all, and therefore cannot pick and choose where it will be. It's everywhere. It's not a god that, as the poet Stevie Smith once said, “comes like a servant when called.” It doesn't choose whose church, synagogue or mosque it will live in, because it doesn't just dwell there, but everywhere. It doesn't intervene in human affairs, because, as Marcus Borg says, panentheism “does not see God as absent, but present.” If God sometimes intervenes, Borg says, how do we account for the non-interventions? (Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*)

Where was God during holocaust, we often ask. Where was God in Rwanda? Where is God in Dar Fur? Why didn't God prevent terrorists from crashing planes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon? It's not a question you can answer. And so, for example, generations of Jews have lost their faith since the Holocaust. It's a God-hurt so fierce the immediate survivors couldn't speak about it with their children, and you have families that don't go to shul, and the kids and grand kids don't really know why.

This God-hurt comes in smaller things, which are not world crises, but tough enough for people. Have you ever prayed for something and not gotten it? I have. For years and years - and I'm talking YEARS - I prayed to meet someone to marry. I was being reasonable. I didn't need a millionaire, you know, not a Nobel Laureate, just a good person. And nothing, nada, zip until I was 40. Despite my most sophisticated theology, I was not above this kind of “please give me” prayer. And I'd keen with God's absence when it went unanswered. No one is above this. The divine intervention model of God is common among us. And it's tragically flawed. In this model, God would seem to grant some prayers and not others – please spare my son (one mother's son lives, another dies) or please send me someone to love (some meet the love of their

lives at 18, some never. Some marriages end in bitterness, some stay sweet and true despite everything.)

People create elaborate reasons for why some prayers are not answered, or why terrible things happen. They might say you sinned, or didn't have enough faith, or simply that it wasn't in God's plan for you. Well, I'm sorry, but the God that is worthy of being called God in my book, doesn't plan things that hurt and kill people. God doesn't think up clever, complicated lessons for us that we can't quite make out, but surely make us miserable in the meantime.

Perhaps we need permission to grieve the loss of this God, to express the level of hurt that this way of looking at God has brought us. I have sometimes heard people describe our church as a place where you don't have to believe in God. That's absolutely true. Don't think anything I'm saying means that you have to believe in God. But too often we are a place where we think we can close the door on our hurt about God and think that takes care of it. And that is not helping us. That doesn't make anything better. Our tradition offers another alternative.

Our Unitarian ancestor, Theodore Parker, once said that "the goodness of God is manifest in that God has given humanity the ability to judge God." (paraphrased by Rebecca Parker, *A House for Hope*) Parker said this in the early 19th century, that one of our gifts from God was the capacity to JUDGE God. That is, we have the capacity to consciously experience life, and to judge models of God against that experience. We are equipped with reason, intuition – and we are capable of learning new ways to look at God. So if the prevailing model of God is a king on a throne – a white, male, heterosexual God to boot – we must recognize that this is a limited human invention, and we are free to come up with something else.

An Episcopalian seminarian I once knew said she felt perfectly fine about getting angry with God. "I figure God is big enough to take it", she said. Unitarian Universalists believe that God is big enough to take being questioned. God is certainly big enough to be radically re-imagined, if need be. "Revelation is not sealed," we believe. So how could one model or one understanding of God clamp down this flow of revelation? Impossible.

This is something I would challenge the New Atheists on. These writers tend to depict old models of God as the capricious wish-giver and punisher, insisting that this is God, and anyone who follows such a God is either a masochist or a fool. And they'd be right, I'm afraid. But they ignore hundreds of years of critique and other models of God. Many of us have experienced a God that is much more interesting, and truer to our experience. There are many, many ways to look at God. One of them might be useful to you.

Pantheism is one way. It sees God as a mysterious force that is part of everything and everyone. Another image for God is one that will be very familiar to you: it's our seventh principle, the interdependent web of all existence. We are in it, we are a part of it; surely it is beyond us, and cannot be bent to our design. And yet it means that we are not isolated beings, but always a part of everyone and everything. What we do is part of God, how we are makes God more manifest in the world.

In pantheism, God is never absent, even when we suffer. To return to my earlier example - if I were to determine the presence of God by the efficiency with which God

“answered” my prayer for true love, well, I wouldn’t have much use for God, even now. Besides, it’s also a lot of pressure to put on my dear spouse. *You’re my proof of God, Dear, just don’t blow it.* Instead, it helps me to see God’s presence in other ways. To feel God in the love of friends who become family, which is especially true for many single people. To feel God in the beauty of the Chesapeake Bay, or the calming of my heart as I walk in the woods of Brandywine State Park. To feel God in the remarkable kindness of people, church members I know. A woman once told me that when she was broken up with grief over losing her husband, someone in our church told her, “Call me – at three in the morning if you need to.” Remarkable. And, if you asked me, God.

Rebecca Parker writes that the question of whether or not God exists does not come from “a cool inquiry” about the nature of existence. She says the God question “arises in the messy, painful dead ends, on cold winter afternoons where life is exposed to the raw elements. It arises among the communities of those lacking bare necessities. It arises among the lonely, the hungry, the frightened, and those without voice. In such settings, the question is not about metaphors or about rational arguments. It is more elemental. It is a question borne in the suffering souls of human beings, and its meaning is a cry for hope. Is there any help for pain?” (Parker, *A House for Hope*)

The question is not, Does God exist, or whose God is true? The real question is whether or not, in the middle of the night, is there some help for our pain. The middle of the night, for the woman whose husband has just died. The middle of the night, for the community that wonders when the jobs are coming back. The middle of the night, for the country that is flooded, and the world is reluctant to give aid. The middle of the night for the planet that is seeing temperatures rise and glaciers melt and islands disappear. If we look for a God that intervenes, we will be bitterly disappointed. But if we look for the presence of God, in other people, in the natural world, in our own hearts, we just may find God. If we believe we are a part of God, we just may.

One reason it has been easy to manipulate people about the Muslim Community Center in New York City is that there is still considerable pain leftover from 9/11. The families who lost loved ones may well be asking, “Where was God?” The rest of America, suddenly finding ourselves more vulnerable than we ever believed, may be asking that question, too. The answer has to be, everywhere. Everywhere. In the firefighters who also gave their lives to help, and the pouring out of kindness among strangers. Including Muslim neighbors who helped, and who were brave in speaking out.

Our Universalist ancestors taught that God is available to all, and is not restricted to a formula or to some correct understanding. God’s presence is not even restricted to the lives of “good” people, and withdrawn from the “bad” people, as if we can say who they are. In their language, every person is a child of God. In other words, they taught that God is love, always present, freely available to all. Barbara Merritt, writes, “Our best prayers are when we can simply turn our faces in the direction of love.” (Merritt, “Love Knows You” in *Amethyst Beach*)

Our faith teaches us that we are part of this love. That when we practice our faith, through showing compassion, we are making the love manifest. We are making God more manifest in the world. We do this not just for ourselves. You could buy books and take

workshops and contemplate the spiritual life by yourself forever and ever, and miss something crucial to faith, which is making God manifest for someone else who really needs it. We practice this faith not just for ourselves, but for everyone else, too, so that no one need be cast out, or suffering, or alone. It takes work, and it takes trust, but it takes you and me and everyone. So may we practice this faith together, building a strong community, and caring for the world. Amen.