

## **A Question of The(a)ology: A Sermon by Emily Richards, CRE**

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### **The First Unitarian-Universalist Society of Ithaca**

You may have figured out that today we're going to talk about God. God with a big G and a little g and gods and goddess, and all the ways that we understand that word. And I know a few of you right are probably feeling a little bit of discomfort. God can be a heavy word in UU communities. How many of you during our opening hymn when we were singing that there must be a god somewhere, were thinking to yourselves, must there? Really? It's not a hymn I've ever heard us sing in a worship service here, but it's one that, honestly, I like. I did a version of this piece with the children's chorus a few years ago that was stripped of the word God. It replaced God with joy. There must be joy somewhere. Does that feel easier? But is joy not divine? Is it not holy? And does our understanding of god not encompass joy? Especially when leaning into our Universalist heritage, and the belief in the all encompassing love of god? Of all that connects us?

Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors had very different beliefs about God than we do today. They are so far removed that, at this point, to call ourselves either Unitarian or Universalist would be theologically incorrect. The roots of Unitarianism are over 500 years old and begin in Transylvania starting with Francis David, a preacher who advocated for the belief in the oneness of God and rejected the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity. About him Rev. Dr. Scott Prinster wrote, "He believed that religious reformation was a constant process of becoming more and more like Jesus' example, and could not be contained in any one unchanging doctrine." Even with a theology that is far removed from our UU beliefs today, you can see the beginning of transformation as a vital part of who we are.

Hundreds of years ago, the idea that this is a living faith where we are changing and transforming was at the center of that initial creation of Unitarianism. Current UU minister Rev. Dr. Sheri Prud'homme wrote, "One of the hallmarks of liberal religion, Unitarian Universalism included, is the idea that revelation is not sealed. That is to say, our religion can and will change by the discovery or unveiling of new truths and new ways of understanding all existence and the sacred."

Unitarianism continued to shift and change throughout the years, with the rejection of Calvinism, the influence of well known Unitarian authors such as William Ellery Channing, and then the Transcendentalists, who ushered in what is possibly the most impactful shift in the history of this faith, which was questioning the Christian concept of God as being the only truth. However, they never really went so far as to question the existence or concept of God, with Emerson famously denying the fatherlike personal God of Christianity while Channing wrote "The Universe I know is full of God." No, that denial happened later in the Humanist movement. What about Universalism though? Our other parent. The second half of our religious DNA, as it were.

Much like Unitarianism, Universalism began as a Christian belief system, one that firstly denied the idea of vengeful God who would punish those who had sinned for all eternity.

Early leaders within the Universalist movement, such as Hosea Ballou, gave practitioners a new understanding of atonement accompanied by an eventual radical shift in their eschatology to the ultra-Universalist belief in salvation for all upon death. They believed that God was a being who welcomed all in love, whose very nature is love. Does that sound familiar? Our Universalist ancestors believed in a god whose very nature was love. The early roots of Universalism differed, in part, from Unitarianism in that the Unitarian faith believed in individual salvation. In contrast, Universalism lifted up communal love as its foundation and focused less on the individual relationship of each person with the divine. However, many of the early Universalist leaders ascribed to a variety of Unitarian views, making the eventual merger, in some ways, unsurprising. So, how did we shift from this belief in god, in a loving god, in a god that could not be constrained within one narrow understanding, that could not be restricted to one truth, to where we are today? To a faith that I have heard referred to as institutionally agnostic. This is where the Humanist movement comes in and would be in close competition with Transcendentalism for having the most significant impact on our understanding of god and faith today.

While both the Unitarians and Universalists were inarguably Christian, the theology of today would be unrecognizable to those who were early adherents of either of those faiths. The long ago disagreements about the trinity versus one true God over time shifted to questioning the divinity of Jesus Christ and then disputing the existence of God altogether. Mark W. Harris wrote: "A 'God' that could be thought of as 'that Love with which our souls commune' was not necessarily a supernatural or transcendent being, or even a being at all. God might be thought of simply as a name or symbol for the aspiring religious sensibility of humanity. If this religious sensibility was not necessarily tied to a transcendent being, it might be thought of more precisely as an expression of the human personality itself, and religion might well be redefined as a purely human enterprise."

Such was the drift of thought that eventuated in the Humanist presence in Unitarianism. I consider myself a humanist, among other things, because I believe in the power of human beings working together to care for one another and do good in the world. And yet I would argue that the humanist movement damaged our ability to open ourselves up, with curiosity, to the possibility of the divine. I don't know if you've ever read *The Humanist Manifesto* but it contains lines like this: "The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained." And *The Humanist Manifesto II* includes the statement: "We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of the supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfillment of the human race." In allowing for the potential of something beyond the Christian understanding of god, instead we somehow moved to the other end of the spectrum, rejecting the possibility of the divine all together.

This theology, if you could even call it such, this secular humanism, permeated our UU communities during the mid 20th century and persists today. In many UU communities there is a foundational belief that the entire idea of God is simply an expression of the human desire for meaning. This led to a period of time in our UU history where many congregations turned away from the divine, the unknown, the mystery of the universe, of God altogether.

And this can be challenging for those among Unitarian Universalist communities who are theists and long for a more explicit connection to a divine being, force, or creator. I've heard people say that they left this congregation because they felt a lack of connection to God here.

I've heard people say that there are queer folks in our community that go to other churches because they feel that their Christian beliefs aren't welcome here. And yet, the humanist understanding of "God" as the "spirit of love" or "spirit of life" persists in UU congregations, and is one of the central concepts that sets UUs apart from other faith communities.

There has been a shift in recent years to a humanist theology that embraces the possibility of the divine. Because if, as posited by many Humanist, and Unitarian-Universalist theologians, God is that Love with which our souls commune then even with the incorporation of Humanist teachings the Unitarian Universalist faith puts, love, and therefore God, at the center of their beliefs. If God is love and love is God, then the understanding of the two, regardless of semantics, is that Unitarian-Universalists are speaking about the same positive force within ourselves and the world. And this belief is reflected in other faiths, faith from which we as UUs draw wisdom and inspiration.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote:

"I think God is on Earth, inside every living being. What we call "the divine," is none other than the energy of awakening, of peace, of understanding, and of love, which is to be found not only in every human being, but in every species on Earth. In Buddhism, we say every sentient being has the ability to be awakened, and to understand deeply. We call this Buddha nature. The deer, the dog, the cat, the squirrel, and the bird all have Buddha nature. But what about inanimate species: the pine tree in our front yard, the grass, or the flowers? As part of our living Mother Earth, these species also have Buddha nature. Every blade of grass, every tree, every plant, every creature large or small are children of the planet Earth and have Buddha nature. The Earth herself has Buddha nature, therefore all her children must have Buddha nature, too. As we are all endowed with Buddha nature, everyone has the capacity to live happily and with a sense of responsibility toward our mother, the Earth."

But where does that leave us in our understanding of God? Or the Goddess if you would like to lift up the divine feminine today, especially in light of it being Mother's Day. And why does this word continue to be so hard for us, when our theology clearly tells us that God is love and love is God and when we use this word we are talking about that same positive force that connects us in this world?

That same force that is the oneness of all beings in Hinduism, that is the sacred earth in many pagan traditions, that is the universe and all that it encompasses in pantheism, that is the energy of awakening, of peace, of understanding, and of love, which can be found in every being on Earth as described by Thich Nhat Hahn.

One of my classmates, who is also doing an internship this year, said in one of our recent meetings that the church they are at "does god really well." And it just struck me, because what she was also saying is that many of our UU congregations don't. We don't "do God well." We tiptoe around it. We avoid religious words whenever possible. And I want to acknowledge that there is a reason for that, which is that many of the people who come to our congregation, and other UU congregations, choose this faith because of a history of religious trauma and harm and these words can be triggering, bringing up feelings of shame and fear and pain. I do believe though that there is a way for us to "do God really well," as my classmate said. And that is to understand that, whatever word we are using - God, goddess, ancient holy one, greatest source, Gaia, The One Supreme Reality, Spirit of Life - we are all talking about the same thing.

My incredibly wise mentor Rev. Douglas Taylor wrote: "One of the great attributes of a Unitarian Universalist congregation is the breadth of theological diversity and the freedom for each individual to follow their distinct path. Many people in our Unitarian Universalist congregations work to develop a theology that makes sense and is honest with the experiences they have had. Whether or not you believe in a God with a physical form or a personal nature, whether or not you believe in a transcendent creator God or an imminent Goddess, whether you call on the multiple names of the Gods and Goddesses or respectfully refuse all names, whether you believe in a Great Spirit or a series of underlying principles that comprise Ultimate Reality, you are welcome here and you are loved and you are encouraged to nourish your spirit and walk your path."

Here we honor the multitudes that exist within our understanding of that which is sometimes named God. Here we will nourish one another as we journey onward, held by that positive force within ourselves and the world. Held by the spirit of life and love. May God be welcome here, just as you are welcome here. May it be so. Amen and Blessed Be.