

Worship Topic Description for Service on God Would Seem Important For a Religious Community

Can We Assume God Exists?

I received a letter a few weeks ago from the minister of my home congregation in San Francisco which announced his resignation. I was surprised both by his resignation and his reasons. He has accepted a position with the United Church of Christ, a Liberal Christian Denomination. One of the major reasons he gave for resigning was that he wished to conduct his ministry in an environment where the existence of God is assumed. As you can probably guess the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco was **NOT** such a place. The members do not even want to call themselves a church – we members are a society and proud of it.

My former minister's resignation raises an interesting question should we assume God exists? Many people outside of Unitarian Universalism, even atheists, struggle to understand how we can be a religion which is wary, resistant or avoids mentioning God. I understand their struggles yet I think fundamental to any religion I wish to be a part of is a responsible and critical reflection on the very idea of God and what we mean by God. How can you have a credible and meaningful belief system if you cannot question a fundamental and foundational assumption?

At its best religion should be helping address those enduring questions about who we are, how we should live, and what is most important in our lives? We should not be trying to save face for the idea of God or the various ideas of God that have been harmful. Framing life's enduring questions in terms of God may seem less and less meaningful to people. Look at how church attendance has declined in our country in recent years. In Zach's reflection earlier this morning he suggested that his life would be easier if he could just assume God existed but he could not do so with integrity. I admire his stance. That responsible part of the responsible search for truth and meaning suggests that no assumption should go unexamined. I believe this to be one the great strengths and great challenges of our Liberal Religious faith.

Whose God Don't You Believe In

I like Zach struggled for much of my life around the idea of God, specifically in finding an image of God that was meaningful to me. I rejected religion as a teenager mainly because of the deep religious divisions between Protestants and Catholics in the West of Scotland where

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I grew up. Religious bigotry was a huge part of the culture. A common question for me growing up was “are you a Protestant or a Catholic?” The question usually wasn’t asked so they could invite you to their church. The wrong answer could often result in a fist or boot flying in your direction and it was not always obvious what the “correct” answer was.

I remember one time thinking I was being shrewdly diplomatic when I replied “I’m an atheist.” Without missing a beat my questioner asked “Yes, but whose God don’t you believe in?” Even atheists suffered from the religious bigotry. Given this type of bigotry I experienced religion mainly as a force of division therefore I rejected organized religion since a God of division and bigotry was not worthy of worship in my view. There is also an important aspect of this experience that I only realized in recent years. Even those of us who identify as atheists often have a particular view of God which we have rejected and don’t believe in. That often is the Old-Man-in-the-Sky who judges and punishes us. I as a teenager rejected this Old-Man-in-the-Sky who divided us into tribes of Protestants and Catholics, right believers and wrong believers. While perhaps a more appealing and just image for many of us, I don’t think an Old-Woman-in-the-Sky is a compelling enough image of God to worship.

Troubling Images of God

Most of our images of God in our North American and European culture are strongly influenced by the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Bible. One problem is the writings are actually referring to many different Gods but all are referred to under the single term God. The writings in the bible were written by different writers in different geographical locations over hundreds of year. We have a God as a tribal chief, a warrior, a powerful King, a harsh judge, a liberator of slaves, an ineffable Spirit, as Divine Reason, a violent Father, a loving Father, and the divine incarnated as a human being.

All the writers of the books of the bible believed themselves to be inspired by God and I would add inspired by a God created from their own cultural context, experience, and personal needs. All these different versions of the human experience of God have created tremendous confusion when you try to squeeze all of these often incompatible and contradictory beliefs into the one word - God. Yet despite all of this confusion the idea of God can have a profound meaning to people and be a powerful source of strength in hard times. I experienced this power through an experience with one of my closest friends.

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My Relationship with Jim

I met Jim in college where we were both studying Physics. He was from the same town I grew up in but we did not meet until college. Jim was Catholic and I was Protestant and the public school system in Scotland is divided into catholic and protestant schools. No separation of Church and State there. While I had moved away from my family's Protestant religion becoming non-religious as a teenager, Jim was strongly grounded in his Catholic faith. We quickly became close friends, a friendship that continued even after I moved to the U.S. in 1986.

Christine's death

In 1990 a tragic accident began a series of events which culminated in my view of God and religion being forever changed. Jim called me on the phone and told me he had just got out of hospital after three weeks. He had been injured in a car accident and most tragically his 28 year old wife Christine was killed. Jim had been trapped in the car with her dead body for about an hour. Christine was a good friend of mine therefore I was devastated and flew back to Scotland the next day to be with Jim. He was understandably devastated and shocked. He had physical injuries to recover from but those were minor compared to the mental and spiritual injuries he had. We spent a lot of time together – talking, grieving, and crying. As part of his rehabilitation Jim came over to stay with me in California for a few weeks.

Jim's visit

We went on a camping trip on the California coast and again had many intimate, heart-wrenching discussions. I was surprised and impressed with the great strength Jim gained from his Catholic faith. I listened to Jim and encouraged him to explore his feelings wherever they were taking him at that time – anger, frustration, sadness, fear, and laughter, yes, there was even laughter at times. At that time I would describe myself as an agnostic though with a strong interest in religion but in the weeks with Jim I was immersed in his religion and beliefs. It was a profound experience for me.

I remember Jim and I sitting around the campfire one night in a beautiful coastal forest. I asked why he never expressed anger or even disappointment at God about what had happened. He said with complete sincerity it was through God that he would be with his wife Christine again. He was absolutely certain about it.

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That was and is still not my theology but there was a moment when I completely believed him. I experienced some transcendent power arise in our relationship at that moment around the campfire as we talked about Christine's death. Our emotions were raw, complex, and intense, yet love was present. Obviously love between Jim and his deceased wife Christine but also a powerful growth in the depth of caring and love between Jim and I. I believe I experienced something many people call God.

I remember being happy, hopeful and even envious of Jim because of his relationship with God and the comfort it brought him in his time of need. I felt this envy for a friend who had just suffered one of the biggest tragedies which could befall a young person, the sudden, violent loss of an intimate loved one. It was a strange, discomfoting but a genuine feeling. I did not have his religious faith at the time but I saw its immense power. This forever affected me and although it was a few years later before I would find my religious path, this experience helped open me to the possibility and motivated my spiritual search for a God of my understanding. This was a profound moment of transformation for me.

God Evolving From and With Us

While I am not certain about the origins of the universe, the theory of evolution and other scientific evidence suggest to me that God is not the creator of the universe and humanity. I believe God did not create human beings but humans have created God or Gods. And I believe this distinction has profound conclusions since we recognize the idea of God as emerging from and evolving with us.

In our Liberal Religious tradition we are free to responsibly embrace and evolve the most meaningful religious thinking regarding God. For me, meaningful religion is not about fixed belief or obedience but about serving some vision larger than ourselves to improve the quality of our lives and our world. God can be something that simultaneously comes from within us and be something greater than oneself.

What images of God do we have?

In the reading earlier, Rebecca Parker said **“Those who have moved through the death of God find themselves entering a new space -- a space in which the divine can be experienced in a fresh way. The baggage of oppressive images has been left behind. In the ensuing openness, a sense of sacred presence emerges and invites**

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articulation.” I invite each of us here to take a moment to reflect on what images of the divine, of the sacred, of God you currently have. And if you struggle to find such an image, reflect on ideas, values, or principles which are really, really important to you right now which guides your life and gives you meaning. Or perhaps just explore what your deepest yearnings of what your life could be. Take some time now in silence to reflect on this.

Rebecca Parker also states **“People come again to the realization that in the face of overwhelming threats to our lives and the life of all we love there is a source of sustenance, resistance and hope that moves within us and beyond us.”** What have been the sources which have sustained you through times of hardship and sorrow such as my friend Jim had through his belief in God after having lost his wife? What are the sources of strength you have to resist the strong forces which cause suffering and injustice in our world? What are the sources of hope you have that can still animate your life to continue living, laughing, and connecting with other people?

Bringing More Goodness into the World

I truly believe I experienced such a source during my time with Jim during his grieving and being immersed in his faith. I believe there is a relational power to our most meaningful relationships that connect us to a source of loving power and caring strength both within and beyond ourselves. As caring human beings we can be an embodiment of this loving power which I choose to call God and be a source of loving-kindness and care to others.

Whether it is sitting by a campfire with a grieving friend, or walking to raise money to help those who are hungry, or gathering together in a loving community to explore what is of greatest value to us during a worship service, I believe all of these acts of serving something beyond ourselves are worthy of praise. Doing good in all its many forms is worthy of worship and our highest commitment. Perhaps the idea of God is the ideal of humanity towards which we can strive - a striving which we can undertake with earnestness, hope, and humility. God may be what arises at the intersection of our consciousness and our conscience which drives us to intentionally bring more goodness into our world through our actions. That for me is a Living God worthy of worship and committing my life to.