

“Creating God in Our Own Image”

UU Church in Reston

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The Monthly Worship Theme for March is “Many Images of God”

“Creating God in Our Own Image”

As we explore this month the many concepts of “God,” let us consider how humans create their Gods in their own (human) images: indeed, images of the divine are diverse and wide-ranging. The “old white man with a beard” came from patriarchal culture. More recently, identities which had previously been marginalized --- women, persons of color, the economic underclass -- - exerted influence on understanding the divine, generating religious systems as diverse as feminist theology, liberation theology, and black theology to include Gods who looked more like more of us. Parents, please take a few minutes this week to ask your children about their ideas of God. We will revisit this during Time for All Ages.

Reading: *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age*, Galen Guengerich

Ours is a secular age not because God is absent from the world, but because we now have “a plurality of options” for understanding the purpose of our existence and creating meaning in our lives. Secularism is not about the elimination of religion but about the proliferation of choices.... Religion is the process of taking everything we know about the universe into account and creating a life of meaning and purpose within it. In order to play this new role, religion must continue to evolve, and our understanding of God must continue to evolve as well. The great religious challenge of our time is adapting our faith to the reality that God is not supernatural.

The evidence (now) demands that the idea of a supernatural God, like the idea of an Earth-centered universe, must be revised. It should rapidly be relegated to the category of archaic relics.... In a similar way, the fact the God turns out not to be supernatural doesn’t mean that God doesn’t exist or that we don’t need to participate in a religious community. In fact, our need for God and religion is greater today than it has ever been. If God is not supernatural, then religion has a serious role to play.

How long will it take for the religions of the West to make this shift? I hope that it won’t take five hundred years. When I look at the physical and institutional violence being perpetrated today (in the name of a supernatural God), especially against women and GLBT people, as well as against the Earth itself, I feel a deep urgency to help **shift the paradigm**. Blind fealty to the ancient dictates of a supposedly supernatural and decidedly male God has been wreaking havoc long enough. It’s time for us to wake up, look up, and accept the truth about our universe and our lives.

Sermon: “Creating God in Our Own Image”

There is a cartoon in a recent *New Yorker* magazine, a copy of which appears on a white insert in your order of service, with several individuals, including a child, walking on the street with long white beards just like God's. The cartoon is instructive for several reasons. For one, its caption -- "Maybe a little less in your own image" --- makes us laugh. For another, in the vein of most good humor, it challenges us to look at God from a different vantage point. The premise of the cartoon is that God made us humans in HIS own image, and overdid it a bit. The cartoon shifts our viewpoint by challenging the orthodox premise that God makes humans in his own image. By now, here in the early 21st century, many people already agree with the cartoon's challenge, that it is we humans who make God in our own image, not the other way round. That is, the image of God and the concept of religion more broadly are human constructs, and thus we humans have the power to influence and change how we define both God and religion.

The other aspect of God in this cartoon less explicitly poked fun at but still central to the humor is God's supernatural quality: if HE were of the natural world, how could he generate beards on women and the young. By extension, how could God engage in other actions beyond rational explanation such as virgin births, bodies rising from the dead, or violent weather intentionally being punishment for human sin and error.

Another underlying premise of the cartoon is that humans of the past constructed God with the tools and vocabulary they had available at any given point in their development. Thus, I would invite us to not be so hard on earlier cultures for coming up with the bearded old man. People of any era tend to make the image of God something they can relate to. It's pretty easy to figure out who designed the image of god we see in the cartoon, constructed when older white males defined power in the western world. Of course they would grant God attributes such as omnipotence and omniscience which the white males in power either had themselves or wished they had more of. Further, even supernatural attributes for the various Judeo-Christian manifestations of God are not that surprising, as early cultures were much closer to the Roman and then Greek systems of gods living in various locations, including the sky.

It's pretty clear by now that this supernatural bearded-old-man image is way out of date: our reading by Rev. Galen Guengerich suggested at least five hundred years out of date. In support of our monthly worship, today we want to consider many faces of god which we have the capacity to create in our own current images. I left room on the insert: during the service you may want to draw your own image of God to complement the *New Yorker's*.

My subject today is "God," but of course God and religion go together. I want to ask you to keep an open mind and an open slate for both as I offer some reflections this morning. First, let us briefly review the meaning of "religion." I have reminded you of that the root meaning of religion, or *re-ligio*, means bound together. Religion is that cultural habit common to all humans through which we ask intimate and ultimate questions about life and death. Rev. Forrest Church defined religion as our response to the awareness of living and the reality that we will die. In our reading, Rev. Guengerich said the reason for religion is not to find salvation for the next life but meaning and purpose in this life, with the hallmark of a religious community being its experience of worship, which provides meaning and purpose through readings, music, wisdom stories, and more. Religion is the process of taking everything we know about the universe into account and creating a life of meaning and purpose within it. By these definitions, the 500-years-behind-the-

times-*New-Yorker*-God is probably not an essential component of religion for most of us, but I hope by the end of this sermon, you will consider how a 21st-century God can enhance the religious experience for even the most God-averse among us.

The nature of God is subject to a proliferation of choices, as our reading said, and many Unitarian Universalist congregations generate lively discussion and sometimes tense disagreements on the topic, in spite of our fundamental liberal value of welcoming, honoring and respecting theological diversity. Some in Unitarian Universalist congregations assert that they do not believe in God or that God does not exist. I would ask, first, what do you mean by “believe in,” a concept which has less and less application as we learn more that the heritage of free faith is based in covenant, not belief. Second, I ask you, what is the nature of the God you deny? Is it the God of the *New Yorker* cartoon you are turning away from? If so, you are right on to reject a concept at least five hundred years out of date: we’ve heard Rev. Guengerich as one voice among many calling us to evolve in our definition of God. However, if you turn away from any consideration of the concept of God, I invite you to stay open to rethinking your position, and possibly to read Rev. Guengerich recent book, *God Revised*, from which I took the reading.

Ways God has Already Evolved

As I said, I expect by now most people sitting here in this liberal religious community have come a long way from the out of date orthodox image of God. Let’s consider several ways in which westerners have already evolved beyond the *New Yorker’s* image.

First, consider the varied language we already use to refer to experiences in life which affirm *religio* and which are often beyond explanation, experiences which we put in the category of the divine. We might use the word “God” to express that connected feeling, but we might also heed the admonition from Forrest Church that “God is not God’s name” but only a place-holder word to express the presence of power greater than any of us, which we might also call by other words such as “life force” or “Holy” or “Being itself.” Our opening hymn, “For the Beauty of the Earth,” called this power “Source of all,” and the meditation hymn referred to God as a “great and fiery force.” On the other hand, God might be understood as the unification of all the experiences in the universe, an experience that bears witness to everything that happens in life --- connecting past, present, and future. This sense of God as unity is found already in the Old Testament, and it was also expressed in the twelfth century by German mystic Hildegard von Bingen. For myself, I sometimes use the word “God” to refer to those life connections and moments of awe which bring tears to my eyes or reassure me that I am connected to a grandeur much larger than myself, experiences that happen most powerfully when I am in nature. Some days I say “God,” but other days I say “mountain” or “love” or “beauty.” God is not God’s name, just a placeholder to express what can never fully be expressed.

Second, another approach to moving beyond the *New Yorker* God which Unitarian Universalists in particular have practiced well for many years is the cultivation of habits by which we define our own personal spiritual path and practices. Remembering well that we draw religious inspiration and authority from many sources, we have many options for our own personal interpretations of God and Religion. It doesn’t matter which path or paths one follows, but what does matter is that each of us have some path, which could change tomorrow. To cultivate this habit of personal spirituality, one tool UUs have used with great success is the Adult Faith

curriculum *Build Your Own Theology: BYOT*. This program explains nearly a dozen contemporary theological options of the past century, many of them created by previously marginalized persons, which are more relevant to modern life than is bearded-old-man God.

Let's briefly review just a few of the many theologies we cover in BYOT to illustrate the various options for new names and concepts of God drawn in the images of their creators. Perhaps I'll name a theology or two new to you which resonates with your life experiences, which you might want to pursue as your personal spiritual path.

Process Theology was defined by Alfred North Whitehead in the early twentieth century on the heels of discoveries in quantum mechanics about the nature of matter. Through a process lens, reality is constantly in process of becoming: there is a new creation every second. The process God is not an omniscient tyrant over the world, but an equal partner --- a co-creator --- of this constantly changing existence, responding to the needs of the world. An image for this God is the earth: the earth is God's body. Grounded in natural laws, this theology is the basis of environmental theology and the basis of the UU Seventh Principle (see the OOS).

Feminist theology evolved in the mid-twentieth century paralleling Second Wave Feminism. It is very much not supernatural but of this world, as it defines woman's body at the locus of the divine: this is embodied theology. Thus, women could finally worship "A God Who Looks Like Me," the title of a recent feminist theology book. Women were willing to use a "G" word again as "Goddess" entered religious vocabulary to point to the divine. Many of you have participated in feminist and women's spirituality programs such as "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven," and woman as divine invites us at church to celebrate secular cultural practices such as Women's History Month during this month of March.

Liberation theology arose in the late twentieth century in Latin American Catholicism. The premise of liberation theology is that God has a preferential option for the poor, so that God and the Bible are best understood from the perspective of the poor and less educated and non-white populations. Liberation theology calls for active engagement in politics and civic affairs, so to bring about tangible changes in social inequity. The founder is usually identified as Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest and theologian. The premise of liberation theology has also been extended to encompass black, Asian, and Palestinian definitions of the holy.

These are only some of the many ways humans in the twentieth created images of God beyond the orthodox white father figure. Notice that I didn't even begin to address how atheists got rid of God completely, fare for another entire sermon.

Evolution of God in the 21st century

Finally, speaking of atheists, Rev. Guengerich agrees with them that God is not supernatural. However, he also agrees with traditional religionists, that a concept of God is necessary. Thus, if the institution of religion is to remain relevant to life in the 21st century, our construction of both religion and God must continue to evolve. We need a concept of God which goes even beyond 20th-century options I just referred to, a God for the scientific age of the 21st century, definitely a God beyond the supernatural. He calls us to evolve in our ability to construct a God which does not go against the law of nature and the current state of scientific investigation to explain those

laws. He calls us to base our concept of God on our common experience of being alive, now, in the 21st century. He also believes strongly that we humans who are capable of atomic explosions and global warming, must find a much greater sense of unity, of commonality, of unification, so that we do not destroy this world. As we evolve toward that unification --- those jugs of clay containing the entire experience of the world ---- we will come to name this sense of common experience, of “re-ligio,” as “God.” He hasn’t come to sure-fire closure yet on what God and religion of the 21st century will look like, but he’s clear that the quality and practice of gratitude will be central. Religion will guide us not in what to believe but in how to live, an attitude very much in keeping with the “Beyond Belief” theological initiative of the current president of the UUA.

Perhaps your sketching during this service has produced an image for Guengerich’s 21st century god. Perhaps today’s musings about a new concept for God might persuade you who have so far participated in religion without including God to change your mind.

What to do with new images of god

What does this theoretical conversation about god have to do with any of us? Well, for starters, I hope it enhances the religious experience for each of us, as we adapt to the notion that religion concerns not what we believe but how we live, that religion and God concern the totality of experiences of being alive.

To that end, I call everyone to examine and re-examine your understanding of the meaning of God and of religion. If you are locked in any paradigms about either God or religion based on life as it was centuries ago, abandon them for new paradigms compatible with life in the 21st century and for vocabulary you relate to. As Unitarian Universalists, we are each called to define a spiritual path for ourselves, a way of explaining this mystery of being alive. There is no more time in my interim ministry to lead a *Build Your Own Theology* class, but I have plenty of materials for any of you to do so. More immediately, I encourage you to consider enrolling for UUCR’s God Class, brought back here by popular demand and starting March 30.

I understand that this class came about in part because some in this congregation feel reluctant to openly express their personal viewpoints about God. Some of you have been caught up in that unfortunate habit of UU theological fundamentalism. The use of the word “God” today has a wide range of meaning, yet I suspect that some of us may infer that when others here use the word “God,” they still mean the old image of a supernatural old white man with a beard. This habit of singular thinking and opinion-building is on which neither I nor your next minister will support. Ours is a faith based on freedom of expression of theological beliefs. No one should feel that their UU Church is the last place they can talk about God: keep such silencing of your tongues about religion for your next Thanksgiving dinner with relatives. I remind everyone that it is the responsibility of all of us to respect the diversity of theological paths we represent and to not hang back in expressing your personal theological position.

As we revise our understanding of God in 21st century terms, new images and concepts can enhance all the more this experience called life. What is most comforting about this is that defining the image of God is in the hands of us humans, not the other way around.

May we go forward accepting well the proposition that a 21st century god and a 21st century religious community are not incompatible. Instead the two are necessary conditions for one another. May we each celebrate our drawings of the God made in our image.

MAY THIS BE SO.

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