

## **Gods I Don't Believe In<sup>1</sup>**

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*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

*Reading:* Excerpt from *Holy Fools*, by Joanne Harris<sup>2</sup>

I have never believed in God. Not in *your* God anyway; the one who looks down onto his chessboard and moves the pieces according to his pleasure, occasionally glancing up at the face of his Adversary with the smile of the one who already knows the outcome. It seems to me that there must be something horribly flawed in a Creator who persists in testing his creatures to destruction, in providing a world well stocked with pleasures only to announce that all pleasure is sin, in creating mankind imperfect, then expecting us to aspire to perfection. ...There must be something else, I told myself repeatedly; something beyond sin and solemnity, dust and devotion; something that loved life as indiscriminately as I did.

*Sermon*

What's in a word? Unitarian Universalists struggle with the concept of divinity and some of our members reject the word and the idea of God. I hope to explore the topic of God in a series of three sermons, beginning today with an account of the "Gods" that I don't believe in.

In the Exodus story, we read that Moses led the Hebrew people out of their slavery in Egypt, with the help of great miracles performed by their God. As they traveled through the desert, they survived by the help of more miracles. They made an agreement with God--he would continue to protect and lead them and they would serve him forever. Then Moses went up the mountain to talk to God, to receive the law.

But after forty days and nights, the people grew restless, and asked Moses' brother Aaron to build them another God to worship, saying "we don't know what has happened to this Moses." Aaron asked for all their gold earrings, melted them down, and formed them into the shape of a golden calf. Then the people brought sacrifices and burnt offerings, and began to create a great celebration for this Calf God.

Well, the story goes on to tell us that God was pissed off, and Moses was pissed off, and many lives were lost, before they repented and reconciled. But that is not what is most interesting to me about this story. What I find most curious is that even though this group of people had been up close and personal with a God who freed them, and did miracles to feed them--they still forgot all about that after only 40 days. They wanted something solid that they could worship--and so they turned their God into an idol.

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<sup>2</sup> *Holy Fools*, Harper Collins, 2004, p. 32-33.

Now you may be wondering, what does this have to do with us? I think it illustrates a perennial problem among human beings--that people are very quick to turn any idea of God into an idol--something solidified, defined, predictable, and under control.

Think about the image of God that many of us may have absorbed as children from our culture. This God is an old white man with a beard and a long white robe who sits on a golden throne in heaven. Remember him? He is supposed to control things on earth and grant favors to the good people who pray to him, while punishing the people who do bad things. There are plenty of preachers on television who will tell you that if you are good and give your life to Jesus and your money to them, that God will make you prosperous and successful and healthy.

And if you don't follow their prescriptions, well, you'd better beware. Televangelist and founder of the conservative Christian Coalition, Pat Robertson has been quick to blame a number of disasters on pagans, feminists, gays & lesbians, and abortion. After the recent devastating earthquake in Haiti, he claimed that the Haitian people had been cursed by God, because they had made a deal with the devil during their 19th century liberation struggle.

I don't believe in that God. I don't believe in a God who is blessing the prosperous people and cursing the misfortunate people. Maybe Pat Robertson doesn't want to see it, but I have noticed that goodness can go hand in hand with poverty, illness and misfortune, and those who are wealthy can more than occasionally be selfish, greedy, and downright evil. I don't believe in a God who rewards the good and punishes the bad. I think *that* God is a kind of idol, a golden calf, created by people to prop up their own insecurity, and apparently, to put other people down.

People have been searching for God, and making idols about God for a very long time. But we have some particular ways of doing it in the modern era. Christian Fundamentalism is one such phenomenon of the modern era. Fundamentalists claim to be bringing back the fundamentals of Christianity, but in fact, their version of Christianity has not existed anywhere prior to the last 100 years or so. They claim that every word in the Bible is the literal and factual truth. But literalism is a very modern way to read the Bible that was unheard of before this era.

After the destruction by the Romans of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, during the time we call the First Century AD, there were various groups of Jews wrestling with their new religious predicament--much of the Hebrew Scripture was centered around the temple, and the rites and rituals of the temple, but now there was no temple.

One group of Rabbis began to re-work their faith into a guide for living as if the temple was everywhere, and how they lived should reflect the priestly status of all the Jewish people. They began to develop new practices for living, and created the beginnings of classical Judaism. They felt perfectly free to re-arrange the Biblical texts, or draw new meaning out of them, use them metaphorically, or even disagree with them. Eventually, a body of literature grew up around this effort, that we now call the Talmud.

There was also another group of Jews making new meaning out of the old scriptures. They were re-interpreting the old texts around the person of their teacher Jesus, whom they saw as the Messiah, who had been crucified by the Romans. They too re-arranged texts, interpreted them metaphorically, and added new writings and practices. They too were grappling as Jews with a temple-less Jewish faith, though now we call them the early Christians. But neither these early Christians, nor the rabbis who shaped the faith of Judaism, were biblical literalists.

Karen Armstrong has written that before the modern era, which was beginning about the time that Columbus set sail for America, “religious discourse was not intended to be understood literally because [they believed] it was only possible to speak about a reality that transcended language in symbolic terms.”<sup>3</sup> As I was preparing for this sermon, I found her book, *A Case for God*, to be very helpful in articulating and expanding my understanding of the historical context for our modern idols.

Armstrong talks about how in premodern cultures there were two recognized ways of acquiring knowledge. *Logos*, or reason, “was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world.” *Mythos*, or myth, “focused on the more elusive, puzzling, and tragic aspects of the human predicament that lay outside of the remit of logos.”<sup>4</sup> The modern world is a world devoted to scientific reason, and has lost track of the meaning of myth--in fact, myth is now defined as something that is not true. But in pre-modern times, myth was the common language of religion, and helped people to wrestle with the challenges that were not so easily solved by reason. Mythic words were meant to be a doorway into that which was beyond words.

The language of myth was linked to the practice of ritual, in which people entered into a communal experience of story, in a way that transcended logical thought or emotion. They were brought to the limits of their rational understanding, into the presence of the mysterious and ineffable, and emerged with a new capacity for living within the tragedy and bliss of this world. Religion was not something that people thought, but something that they did. People who put in the hard work and perseverance it required “discovered a transcendent dimension of life” that was also “identical with the deepest levels of their being.”<sup>5</sup>

Modern religion has taken the language of reason, and attempted to apply it to the realm of mythos. Whereas, prior to the modern era, the word “faith” meant trust, commitment, and dedication, in the modern era, faith came to mean an intellectual affirmation of unprovable facts about a divine being. When reason was beginning its ascent, many Christian religionists fell into the trap of shifting to the language of reason to try to defend and define the undefinable. They drew further away from the mystical and miraculous elements of the faith stories. The Deists,

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, (Alfred Knopf, 2009), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong, p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

for example, saw God as an unseen clockmaker, who had set the world in motion like a well-oiled machine.

But as Newtonian science began to explain more and more of origins, there was less and less need for this rational God, and eventually God became superfluous to the scientific endeavor. In the meantime, the logos way of looking at things had become the norm. So when some religionists fought back in defense of God, they did so in a literalistic and idea-based mode--they claimed that truth could be found in the literal words of the bible, and that faith required that one believe every word of this literal bible as historic and scientific truth. And they became very intolerant of anyone who held differing definitions.

We have been so thoroughly immersed in the modern era, that it is difficult to imagine the realm of mythos. If our only option is that big guy in the sky, no wonder that another phenomenon of the modern age has been the rise of atheism. Atheism affirms the methods of science and the language of logos as the only reliable path to truth, and concludes that it is impossible to find evidence to prove that God exists. Fair enough! But the only God many atheists are now choosing to debunk turns out to be the God of the fundamentalists--that big guy in the sky.

One of the criticisms of the work of such contemporary atheist writers as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris is that they refuse to debate with theologians who have more nuanced or developed understandings of religion or divinity. They too can be intolerant of any who disagree. Both fundamentalists and atheists are relating to a God in a box--a God that is defined and described as if it were possible to say exactly what God is.

There are many attributes of their God that I might find good reason to debate--I don't believe in a God who is a male. I don't believe in a God who is squeamish about sex. I don't believe in a God who would send His children to the eternal torment described as Hell. I don't believe in a God who would arrange for his son to be killed, to satisfy his anger at the mistakes of other people. I don't believe in a God who would cavalierly destroy this earth, and bring up a few obedient followers to some new place, to gloat over the suffering in triumph.

But deeper than any of these particular attributes is the fact that I don't believe in a God that can be defined by human logic. The word define means to place limits around. That God is too small for me. If God is God, if that concept is to have any meaning for me, then I need to go back to the language of mythos--the language that leads us through language into that which lies beyond language.

Karen Armstrong describes a ritual that used language in this way, during the tenth century BCE in India. The Indians of that time gave the name *Brahman* to the unseen principle beyond the gods, the sacred energy that held all the world together, and in fact was the all of reality.

The Brahmin priests developed the Brahmodya competition.

The contestants began by going on a retreat in the forest where they performed spiritual exercises, such as fasting and breath control, that concentrated their minds and induced a different type of consciousness. [The] goal [of the contest] was to find a verbal formula to define the Brahman, [but then it went beyond that.] The challenger asked an enigmatic question, and his opponent had to reply in a way that was apt but equally inscrutable.

The winner was the contestant who reduced his opponents to silence--and in that moment of silence, when language revealed its inadequacy, the Brahman was present; it became manifest only in the stunning realization of the impotence of speech.<sup>6</sup>

How often do we carry language to the very limits of language, and enter that kind of silence?

I remember when I was an undergraduate student at Aquinas College, I learned that the very wordy theologian Thomas Aquinas had said at the end of his days, that all of his work was like grass, and should be burned in the fire. There was no way to put the true reality into words. I was lucky enough to grow up reading the words of the Christian mystics like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, who moved beyond the dogmatic Catholicism of their time and my time, into a relationship with the divine that was beyond all dogma, beyond all images.

One of those mystics was a Dominican preacher, Meister Eckart. In the pre-modern 13th century he wrote:

For if you love God as he is God, as he is spirit, as he is person, and as he is image--all this must go! Then how should I love him? You should love him as he is nonGod, a nonspirit, a nonperson, a nonimage, but as he is--pure, unmixed, bright "One" separated from all duality; and in that One we should sink eternally down, out of "something" into "nothing."<sup>7</sup>

I think my experience was rather unusual for kids my age. But it reminds me that even in the most dogmatic of situations, that element of mythos is not totally lost from our world. Even among the fundamentalists--I am sure that there are people who move beyond the narrow literal images into something beyond--something more silent and mysterious and expansive. So when I criticize that system, I do not mean to imply that there can be no authentic spirituality among them. I do mean to challenge the solidification of those images of God into an idol, and into a weapon to condemn those of us who choose a different path.

The Zen Buddhists tell this story:

The nun Wu Jincang said to the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, "I have studied the Mahaparinirvana sutra for many years, yet there are many areas I do not quite understand. Please enlighten me."

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Armstrong, p. 155.

The patriarch responded, "I am illiterate. Please read out the characters to me and perhaps I will be able to explain the meaning."

Said the nun, "You cannot even recognize the characters. How are you able then to understand the meaning?"

"Truth has nothing to do with words. Truth can be likened to the bright moon in the sky. Words, in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point to the moon's location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger..."<sup>8</sup>

I want to call us to a deeper appreciation of truth--that we not be attached to any ideology in a way that becomes a kind of idolatry of the mind. Words and ideas about god are not meant to be literal. They are like the finger pointing to the moon. If we spend a lot of energy debating the nature of the finger--what good will that do for us? If we defend the finger, or try to ridicule the finger, or argue about the finger--we're missing the point. The point is that the finger is pointing to the moon.

May we learn to shift our gaze, and discover that beauty and mystery!

### *Closing Words*

One day a devoted Talmudic student ran out of the synagogue shouting, "What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of life?" He ran through the streets shouting all the while. He found himself before the house of his Rabbi. He went inside and, almost in tears, pleaded, "What is the meaning of life, master?" The rabbi slapped the student across the face. "Why did you hit me," asked the startled student. The rabbi answered: "Such a good question. And you want to exchange it for an answer? It is the answers that keep us apart. It is the questions that unite us!"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Traditional Zen story, found at <http://www.awakeblogger.com/2008/11/the-meaning-of-the-finger-pointing-to-the-moon/>

<sup>9</sup> Traditional story found at <http://comeuppance.blogspot.com/2005/03/ethics-for-activists-5.html>