

## **Theological Misconceptions**

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As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; and acceptance of one another with encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. So some people mistake this affirmation and acceptance as meaning anything goes, whoopee, that all concepts and ideas are equally valid, healthful and helpful on our spiritual journey. This in fact is demonstrably not true. Some conceptions of God in particular have done untold harm to many people, and continue to do so. Since we all struggle with these concepts, let's look at them today.

Any theological discussion begins with a question of authority, by what authority will you decide what is ultimately true and good? I learned at seminary that all religious perspectives can be typified by the relative weight that they lend to four possible sources of authority, those being scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. Most Muslims and many Baptists give ultimate authority to scripture, being in their case the Koran and the Bible respectively. Most Catholics, Orthodox Jews and Orthodox Christians give ultimate authority to tradition, what has been the teaching of their religious forebears over centuries? Most Taoists and also many Buddhists grant ultimate authority to experience, if the teaching doesn't match your lived experience, then the teaching is wrong, not your experience. Secular humanists and Unitarians have most often granted ultimate authority to reason: the result of a reasoned argument takes precedence over tradition, scripture, or even what you experience, since reason is objective and experience is only subjective. Working from reason alone it is quite logical to decide that the whole concept of God makes no sense. How we arrive at religious truth depends largely upon what authority we rely upon. Perhaps I can tell you the story of my own path to God while also honoring and respecting what you have learned on your journey?

Mistakes have been made. Whether you learned about God from your minister, your priest, your rabbi, or the kids in the schoolyard, whether the nature of God was first explained to you at three or thirty, by your mother, Aunt Mildred, or your favorite college professor, it is likely that at least some of the things you learned about God are not healthy, and more to the point, not even helpful. God is a deep and abiding mystery, present in many of our lives, meaningful and yet misunderstood. It is hard to talk about God if we don't know what we are talking about. So enter the mystery!

My Dad was a mid-twentieth century Baptist minister, which is to say that he accepted the Bible as the ultimate source of authority, but being intelligent and college educated, he also felt that all religious beliefs ought to be subject to reason. Since I came of age in 1968, I tended to question all authority of any kind, and tended to place my faith in experience; if I couldn't experience it for myself than as far as I was concerned it was not meaningful or real. You can imagine that as a teenager I had some disagreements with

my Dad, but even before then I was distressed by what I found in the Bible, which for Baptists is the ultimate source of all authority.

I had a problem with God's omnipotence as seen in Moses and the ten plagues. God has Moses tell Pharaoh "to let the Israelites go" but then God "hardens Pharaoh's heart" so he will not agree. This happens not once but nine times, with God raining down upon the Egyptians blood in the water, frogs falling from the sky, gnats, flies, disease, boils on the skin, hail storms, locusts and darkness. As it says in Exodus 11:10 "Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; but God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land." Finally God kills the first-born child of every Egyptian, sparing the Jewish children and hence creating the basis for Passover, and Pharaoh begs the Jews to just go! But then God hardens Pharaoh's heart again and his army gives chase causing the disaster at the Red Sea. How does this not feel like mere sport if he is an omnipotent God?

I have a problem with God's omniscience as early as the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent, and have eaten an apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which God thoughtfully placed in the middle of the garden. So as told in Genesis 3:8-13: evening comes and God comes looking for them but has to ask "Where are you?" Adam replies: "I was afraid because I was naked." So God asks "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Adam blames it on Eve, and Eve blames it on the snake. How is this not God's fault, he created these beings, set up the situation, how is it that he doesn't know what happened here?

My biggest problem is with the notion that God is perfect and therefore unchangeable. Since if God is perfect and unchangeable, why does he care if we worship him, or even if I decide to skip Sunday school? What difference can that make to God? If my behavior can have no influence upon the divine, then it seems highly likely that the divine could not care less about me. So I came to have real concerns about these common understandings about God, and it became far worse when I saw the harm that is done to so many people in justifying these understandings of God.

During my chaplaincy training I met many people struggling to adapt to life as they experienced it. After working at the hospital several months, I went one day to visit a patient and found myself warned away by her nurse. The nurse told me that this woman was dying of a curable disease, but seemed to have given up on life, and was nasty and bitter to all those with whom she came into contact. As Chaplain, I went in to visit her anyway. After several visits, she finally began to tell me her story. When she was in her twenties and had a young baby to care for, her husband became highly erratic, abusive, and finally died from an undiagnosed malignant brain tumor. She raised their child alone, pouring all of her love into her boy for the next twenty-five years. When her son was twenty-eight, he graduated from Dartmouth with a Medical Degree, and died that weekend in an automobile accident by a drunk driver. This was clearly undeserved suffering!

If that isn't sad enough, her minister told her it was the will of God. This woman was bereft and angry with God. I became angry with God right along with her. We got angry together, the unfairness of it all, if this was God's will he was no God we wanted to worship. She had been raised Lutheran, so she asked me one day whether we weren't risking eternal damnation to be so angry with God. I told her that at times I have a fairly contentious relationship with God, but perhaps that is how he knows that I love him. And I am on pretty good relations with God and so knew that God must understand, particularly given her circumstance. God must have been crying right along with her at the premature deaths of her husband and her son. After many weeks talking together, she began to let go of a little of her anger, and even her incredible pain. Life had dealt badly with her, yet it was still life, and she began to gradually find her way back to integrating these truly horrible experiences into her sense of life and ultimately her sense of self.

She began to remember and to lift up the good times with her young husband, the wonderful experiences in raising her devoted son. Her life, like every life, included many fine moments and experiences along with the truly tragic deaths of her loved ones. As she remembered and honored the good times of her life, she began to be kinder and gentler with herself and with all those with whom she came into daily contact. There had indeed been much good in her life but by holding only onto the horrible pain she had endured, she had prevented herself from also recognizing life's goodness for her. In time, she was able to let go of some of the pain and agony. She even began to forgive God so that we were finally able to pray together asking for healing and wholeness. Over the weeks, I grew to love this elderly woman and to cherish the times we spent together, soul answering with comfort to soul.

So it was a relief when I discovered the UU theologian Charles Hartshorne, and read how he described these theological misconceptions about God grew out of Plato's theories of ideals, which were the bedrock of Greek and Roman thought, and had nearly nothing to do with the texts that became the Jewish Torah and the Christian Bible, but rather came from the early days of Rabbinical Judaism and Roman Christianity, where the teachers worked so hard to reconcile these emerging religions with orthodox Greek and Roman philosophy. I discovered that God isn't necessarily to blame for all of the horrible things that are attributed to him. These theological conceptions have been a source of strength and meaning for many people, but for others they are a misconception that can do irreparable harm in pursuit of meaning and connection. So too those mistakes Hartshorne calls three additional mistakes: God's unsympathetic goodness, seeing immortality as a career after death, and the infallibility of ancient revelation as recorded in Holy Scripture. These do not adequately describe the God I encountered in my own experience of life. Carol Christ, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century feminist theologian, contends that God is irrelevant if God is not engaged with and transformed by what happens in our lives. The notion of a remote, supremely good God who does not suffer our misery and rejoice with our happiness is worse than no God at all. For God to be relevant God must be in relationship with us, and those in true relationship cannot remain unmoved by suffering or deep joy, but will deeply engage with us.

The most astonishing conception for me though is this obsession with death, a religion centering on Jesus' death on the cross, and the sole basis for morality or ethics being a fear of Hell, or a lust for a heavenly hereafter. This is not the religion that the Bible or Torah speaks about, but rather a medieval addition elevating death. UU ministers bring hope not the fear of hell to their congregations. When my children were small, my parents used to come to spend the weekend with us, and since on Sunday morning Loretta and I would take the kids to church, my parents would come and worship with us at First Parish UU in Concord. My Baptist minister father was always mystified about why the church was so crowded. He asked me once, "How many people are here this morning?" I replied, "About 300 people." "And none of them believe in hell or damnation" he asked quite surprised? "Probably not" I said. "Then why don't they just stay home and read the New York Times, why do they need to go to church?" I never did convince him that church can be for more than salvation, and far more than an insurance policy against hell and damnation!

But the most troubling aspect of fundamentalism in many faiths, for me, is this notion of one book containing infallible religious truth, which by definition means that all other truths are suspect. When people quote from the Bible, and assume that their personal interpretation of a biblical passage settles all argument, it is for me deeply disturbing. All documents ever composed by humans are at best true within the context of the cultures that created them. All texts are limited by the wisdom of the people who try to interpret them. Revelation cannot be sealed, but rather we are still able to listen for God in our own lives and in our own experiences. This is why congregational Christians today remind us all that "God is still speaking." This is also a common 21<sup>st</sup> Century UU notion of the divine. That God is real which speaks deeply to you through your lived experiences, and is consistent with both your reason and your affect, and helps you upon your spiritual path. Such is true God!

If you come upon a notion of God that fails this simple test, that conception of God cannot be true for you and your life. It is better to have no conception of God than to have a misconception that does you harm. Adapting to living with somebody else's concept of God is like trying to run a race wearing someone else's shoes. They may fit you perfectly, but more likely they will pinch and hurt and prevent your progress. I have seen too many people go lame from poor fitting conceptions of the divine. It is often better to go barefoot than to wear poorly fitting shoes. The same is true for God. If the shoe fits, wear it! But in living in deep intimate relationship with this mystery of life, many of us do best when we learn to bring many names for this mystery, and to be open to all the myriad ways in which God can speak and move in our lives. And so may it be for us. Amen.