

## **“Beyond A/theism”**

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*at the First Parish in Wayland, MA*

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As many of you know, I was raised as an evangelical Christian in Michigan. As an *evangelical* Christian, I grew up with deep sense that religion was not confined to Sunday mornings, but intended to shape all of my daily life—including prayers at mealtimes and bedtimes. As such, the language of Christian theism permeated my life. God. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Savior. Father. Again and again these names for God flowed in prayers day after day, year after year.

However, I resisted, rejected, and reconsidered this language, theism, and Christianity through a period of spiritual seeking in my 20's and 30's. My searching finally led me to Unitarian Universalism and my preparation to become a UU minister. To my surprise, the question of God-language reemerged in my first week as a ministerial intern when I learned I would be leading the congregational prayer on Sunday. I stared at my supervisor. The what?! A prayer? But, wait. I have to *pray*?! I quickly realized that whereas I had been comfortably sitting back listening to others pray or meditate that I, in fact, had not been called upon to *pray* in many, many years.

My problem with prayer was simple: I didn't know how to begin. All I had ever known of prayer was some version of Dear God, Heavenly Father, or Jesus. Such words would no longer work; they no longer felt authentic to my religious understanding. I paused and wondered, *had I become an atheist without even noticing?!?*

My decades of questioning and searching for relevant frameworks of religious understanding were not a haphazard wandering. To the contrary, I attended seminary and then finished a doctorate in theology. Along the way, I learned about new and different ways to conceptualize God and religion.

First, through a group of progressive Lutherans, I met a sense of the Christian God grounded in visions of God's freely given grace—an abundance that sought to express love over judgment, that sought compassionate and socially just relationships with and among humanity. Then, through the radicals of liberation theology, I learned to see God as a force working in history on the side of the poor and the oppressed.<sup>1</sup> In this framework, salvation and the religious project is one that has very material expectations and manifestations.

From the philosophers of religion, I learned to re-conceptualize what I did and *could* know about the nature of God—to consider seeing God less as a divine *person* whose attributes

and name we know, and more as what Paul Tillich refers to as *the ground of being*.<sup>ii</sup> I hear a similar expression of this idea in the words of Forrest Church who wrote, “God is not God’s name, but *that which is greater than all and yet present in each*.”<sup>iii</sup> Such a God is not a *thing* or a *person* to be named and studied, but a dimension of the universe that we encounter and can never fully grasp.

Indeed, seminary also introduced me to Rudolf Otto who seeks to describe the encounter with “God” through an exploration of “the idea of the holy.”<sup>iv</sup> For Otto, the “non-rational, non-sensuous” experience of the incomprehensible mystery of the Holy evokes both a sense of fascination and of terror. I heard echoes of this sense of fear when I studied the work of Marcel Gauchet who described the origins of religion as an effort of primitive peoples to name and thereby contain the inexplicable and unpredictable in nature and the wilderness.<sup>v</sup>

In my doctoral work, I explored the interaction of religious beliefs and cultural contexts. More specifically, as a *feminist* scholar of religion, I asked how ideas about gender and religious beliefs interacted with each other to reinforce certain patterns of inequality between men and women. For example, the feminist Mary Daly infamously wrote, “If God is male, then the male is God.”<sup>vi</sup> In other words, what we believe about God and religion can have profound impacts on how we organize our social systems. Through my critical analyses of religion, gender, and culture, I learned how patterns of sex, gender, race, class, nationality, and all manner of social inequality intersect and interact with each other . . . and with religion.

If you notice, by this point in the story, language of God has dropped out. Indeed, as a doctoral student in religious studies at an elite university, I had learned that one does not speak of belief in God or one’s personal faith. Rather, we talked *about* religion, *about* what other people may or may not believe about God, gods, goddesses, Allah, the Buddha, or any other person or object of religious devotion. We were scholars who *studied* religion—addressing our own personal beliefs would only muddy the waters of scholarly objectivity.

So as a scholar, I studied and wrote about religion. But, at the same time, I had begun attending church again—a church affiliated with both Christian Congregationalists and Unitarian Universalists. I told people how great the church was—I knew all the hymns, but belief in God was optional! I could enjoy the religious culture of my youth without having to assent to any theological claims about God or Jesus or Christianity with which I didn’t agree. I was sold . . . so much so that I began the process of becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister.

So now we're back to week one of my role as a ministerial intern and my assignment to pray. Pray?! How do I start? To whom or to *what* do I address my prayer, if I wasn't praying to this person named God?

I think its time for a short pause. We all knew that a sermon about God would be dense, but I've really just downloaded a lot of ideas and concepts in rapid fire—encapsulating a journey of decades into less than ten minutes.

I did so for two reasons. One, as your new minister, some of you were probably wondering where I stand on “the God question.” And, two, I don't think that I'm alone in my experience of exploring a range of ideas about God. I suspect many of you have asked similar questions:

- Is God a person?
- If God is a person, than what does God want from me? From us?
- Who or what does God care about in this world? The morally perfect? The theologically correct? Or, the most vulnerable?

OR, maybe you've asked yourself:

- Does such a God even exist? How can I believe in the idea of a divine person with all-knowledge and all-power controlling the universe . . . especially when there is so much suffering and wrong in the world?
- Maybe God simply created the world, but then stepped back and *we* humans are the ones who have broken the world . . . and who must help repair the world?
- Heck, maybe God didn't even create the world—maybe its just us humans and all the other quirks of space and time who are trying to make the best of where we've found ourselves?
- Or, maybe there is no such person named “God”, but there is a certain force in the universe that seems to draw us toward a particular sense of the good—towards love and compassion, harmony and justice?
- Maybe there is a mystery that is greater than all, yet present in each?

These are *big* questions. I know that there are likely even more varieties of such questions in this room and in the larger public discourse.

Yet, it seems that the “God-question” too often gets boiled down to a much simpler question: theist or atheist? Over the last few years of becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister, I have repeatedly been asked to label myself . . . theist or atheist? As someone whose religious journey began so firmly in Christian theism and then wandered around in

various terrains of concepts of god, religion, and culture, I struggle with answering this question. As I've tried to show, I do not think that reducing the complexity of how to understand and name our experience of the universe can be reduced so simply to a binary of theism or atheism—just pick one.

Rather, I want to ask what would it look like to move beyond a debate of theism vs. atheism or even theism vs. humanism. Wherever we may feel that we fall within this debate, I want us to consider not only who is the God that we believe in, but also who is the God that we *don't* believe in? Because whether one claims to be a theist or an atheist, both contain a concept of God that one accepts or rejects. So who or what is that God that you do *or don't* believe in?

For a rather long time I've chosen to not use language of God—especially in moments of congregational prayer or in sermons. I suspect that many of you have noticed this . . . and that many of you have even appreciated this! Even before indicating my interest in becoming your minister to the search committee, I was aware that this congregation had a strong humanist identity. And, through the search process and in my first months of being here, I've also heard how many struggled with the theist language of the recent interim minister. Some of you may be astounded that I'm now daring to talk about God. Some of you may be wondering what took me so long. Given the tensions around language of God, I knew that at some point I did need to speak up and weigh in. So here we are.

As I stand within these waters of God-talk, I reach for the words of Forrest Church as a lifeline—"God' is not God's name." As one who grew up beginning my prayers like a letter, "Dear God" or "Dear Father God in Heaven", this declaration that God is *not* a name strikes me hard. I've recently begun to realize that even after all those years of study and alternate concepts of God, that to me the language of "God" still referred to the divine person of Christian understanding. For this reason, I chose not to say "God" in order to avoid being mistaken for someone who believed in *that* God—*that* all-powerful, all-knowing personal God whom I needed to please and appease. *That* God I don't believe in. *That* God has too often been used to justify patterns and practices of hierarchy and patriarchy, inequality and oppression. So, I didn't say it. I didn't say God—seeking to avoid contributing to a religious system of belief that as a feminist and as a humanist I reject for its devaluation of the worth and dignity of all persons.

But recently I found myself standing alone on moonlit dunes overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Since growing up along the shores of Lake Michigan, such places of solitude with sand and surf have long been deeply spiritual places for me. As crashing waves and dancing moonlight filled my spirit, I felt a long dormant spiritual muscle flex. I felt what Forrest Church described as "the highest power we can imagine . . . that which is greater than all

and yet present in each.”<sup>vii</sup> Over the years, I’ve had other such moments of feeling myself connected to a sense of something more, to an energy that permeates all of life and existence. And, over the years, I’ve reached for different language to articulate what I have felt in such moments. I have referred to “the Holy Spirit,” to a “sense of transcendence,” to the “wonder of life,” or, simply, to “God.”

In an essay about God-talk, feminist Biblical scholar, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, weighs in on a debate among feminists and conservatives about *gendered* language of God.<sup>viii</sup> Arguing for the need to move beyond the gendered binary of male and female, Schüssler Fiorenza suggests “God” is a mystery that belies ever being fully expressed in any one way. Accordingly, the best way to talk about God is to do so with many, many words, phrases, and expressions. Only in the *plurality* of expression can we begin to understand the *complexity* of the mystery of God.

So also, I would suggest that we need to move beyond the theism and atheism binary of language for God. Rather, we need to explore new and better ways to express our biggest questions about God, the nature of the universe, and our relationship to both. For example, in a recent book, Galen Guengerich challenges readers to *revise* their understanding of God to fit with the world as they know it. He writes, “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.”<sup>ix</sup>

By writing a time of prayer and meditation nearly every week for two years as a ministerial intern, I was forced to wrestle with to whom or to what I addressed my words. Through that process, I came to understand my role as finding words that would help to connect our lives with the larger currents and dynamics within and beyond the congregation. When I pray, I am addressing that which is “greater than all and present in each”. When I pray, I am crying out to a sense of God that has been my experience from before I could speak and which continues to evolve everyday—in ways that I find both terrifying and fascinating.

My hope for all of us is that we continue to allow ourselves to question what we do not know about God, about the mysteries of the universe, and about living a meaningful and purposeful life.

So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> For a foundational example of liberation theology, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson.

<sup>ii</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

<sup>iii</sup> Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of Love: A Universalist Theology*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), p172.

<sup>iv</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

<sup>v</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>vi</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

<sup>vii</sup> Church, p3.

<sup>viii</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "G\*d-the Many Named: Without Place and Proper Name," in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 109-126.

<sup>ix</sup> Galen Guengerich, *God Revised*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p12-13.