

# Giving Up God

*Rev. Daniel Budd*

My wife was scanning a recent issue of the *UU World* one morning, and read this letter to the editor to me:

In his column, President Buehrens lauds "a God who is not self-involved or fearful but creative and therefore always giving away being and power. A God who is not static but growing and changing, who is hurt or given joy by what we do or leave undone..."

I can't guess what he's talking about. Does he mean a supernatural spirit, or some facet of human psychology, or what? Similar baffling comments are heard from Unitarian Universalist (UU) pulpits.

Well, I've been engaging in just such "baffling comments" for most of my career, and will continue to do so this morning; and furthermore I submit to you this letter as a concise example of all that we need to give up about the image of God.

First of all, we need to give up the allergic reaction which occurs whenever we hear or read the word, God, and which causes us immediately to assume it refers to "a supernatural spirit or some facet of human psychology," or any other similarly simplistic and unimaginative idea. This, my friends, is not the kind of broad-minded thinking we keep saying we pride ourselves upon. It is, instead, every bit as narrow as the narrow theologies we rightly criticize.

Second, we need to give up the notion that we can even begin to capture the idea of God in human definition. The idea of God cannot be contained in any brief or lengthy exposition. It was not contained in John's remarks (evocative as they were); it was not contained in the scope of this letter; and it most certainly will not be contained by this sermon. It is a concept that cannot be contained at all, as illustrated by the 15th century philosopher, Nicholas of Cusa, who stated, "God is circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere."

The letter concludes, When a UU says "God," it causes confusion because nobody can be sure what is meant. Again, narrow and limited thinking in the magazine of a religious tradition that values broad and expansive thought, feeling and action. Our tradition has given us ways we can understand one another to mean when we hear that little three-letter word, God. Why so many of us persist in attaching old, outworn definitions—like supernatural spirit, for instance—is quite frankly what baffles me. I wonder, if what is really going on is that we simply enjoy quarrelling about it.

A friend once returned from a trip through parts of the western United States with a simple gift for me from Crazy Horse Mountain in the Black Hills of South Dakota: a sign, of sorts, containing words attributed to Chief Joseph. It said:

They will teach us to quarrel about God, as Catholics and Protestants do. We do not want to do that. We may quarrel with men sometimes about things on earth, but we never quarrel about the Great Spirit. We do not want to learn that.

Unfortunately, we have; and we have not been alone. Practically the entire Western religious tradition has learned to quarrel about God all too well. History is full of far too many examples of how we make up definitions about who and what God is, declare them definitive, proclaim our perspective to be primary, and then proceed to mistreat, murder and maim in the name of this god, to separate and divide people based upon these beliefs, to justify bigotry and wars and crusades and progroms, to demean and belittle, to strip dignity and integrity from any who do not share this particular tiny, narrow, brittle and rigid view of this Great Spirit of Life, of the Engendering Energy of the Universe, of the Mystery, of the Ground of Being.

We certainly have learned to quarrel with one another about God all too well. A good deal of this quarrelling has been within our own Jewish and Christian traditions. I guess most of the folks who engaged in the numerous quarrels of, between, and among these faith expressions simply forgot an ancient story that comes early in the Hebrew scriptures (early, as if to let us know something from the outset, from the very beginning, lest we become confused about it later). It is the story of God calling Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. It is the story where Moses, always one to question God and make certain he understands just what is going on, says to God:

"If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

And God replies to Moses:

I AM WHO I AM [or I Will Be Who I Will Be, or I Am What I Am, or I Do What I Do].

This God replies to Moses:

"Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

(Exodus 3:13& 14)

No doctrines or dogmas there. No definitive definitions. No exclusionary proclamations. A simple statement of being. I am what I am. Very Zen; very Taoist; very...So Many Other Things. A simple, profound statement that Being Itself is what God is, and is what best names God.

Yet things got terribly muddled as time went on: Growing numbers of people forgot this story and decided that they had the Only Definition of God Possible. Growing numbers of people decided that they could tell others exactly what God was and is and evermore shall be, Amen.

Now we should thank these people, from the bottom of our hearts, for without them, we wouldn't be here today. The history and heritage of the Free Church grew out of women and

men who rebelled against confining the image of God by human creed or dogma (that is to say, by human definition). The Free Church grew out of individuals who sought to live in the freedom of a faith that did not "fence the spirit, nor close off the sincerity of conversation with which souls must meet in religious association." (Wallace Robbins)

But even as we are grateful, we need to acknowledge that more often than not, we still bring these rejected definitions of God along with us. Sometimes we continue to allow them to be the One and Only Definitions of God, which we again reject, but then continue to quarrel about. This is the God we have to give up, to let go—for this little, human idol of a god is nothing but an irritation that does not effect our lives in any positive, helpful way—it can do one thing particularly well, however: it can help us avoid looking outside the god-box toward any expanded and expansive, deep and deepening notion of the Ground of Being and our relationship to it.

I believe that we have been so embroiled in our own liberal version of the God quarrel, that we have all but institutionalized it. We call it: the Humanist/Theist Controversy. Allow me to offer an all-too-brief and inadequate overview of how I understand the evolution of this controversy.

At our beginning, the Unitarian church was the church of liberal Christianity. Unitarian beliefs were based upon a liberal interpretation of the Biblical story. We believed in the God of the Bible, and that Jesus was not divine but rather an example of the greatness possible in the human spirit. As William Ellery Channing wrote:

I see the marks of God in the heavens and the earth, but how much more in a liberal intellect. . .in a philanthropy which forgives every wrong, and which never despairs of the cause of Christ and human virtue! I do and must reverence human nature.

"In ourselves," he wrote, "are the elements of the Divinity." (Lyttle 1 & 11)

Then came Emerson and the Transcendentalists who expanded upon this basic interpretation by thinking outside the 19th century Christian box altogether. Emerson saw not just human nature, but all of Nature and Creation itself as Divine. Like Channing, he saw the marks of God throughout the heavens and the earth as well as in each individual—let us learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to our hearts, he wrote in his essay, "The Over-Soul," that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds. As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.

Yet, instead of embracing the broad vision of Channing, Emerson and the Transcendentalists, many of our ancestors continued simply to bump up against Christianity, to say "no" to this and that. In response, many others became entrenched in what might be called a conservative, liberal Christianity that clung to old ideas and interpretations. I suggest that this may be seen as the early evolution of the so-called Humanist/Theist controversy. I also suggest that it is not a creative or helpful dialogue for us any more. It is, instead, a stand-off, a stalemate, with both views, in essence, rejecting the same thing, saying "No" to the same narrow view of

God—but too embroiled in saying "no" to one another to notice that there is a way to say "Yes" to Something More.

What both are rejecting is what Rev. A. Powell Davies called in a 1946 sermon the "the God of miracles and interventions, of revelations and salvations, of tyranny and sentimentalisms." This God, as Davies pointed out, is dead. "There is no longer any kindness," he said, "in letting anyone cling to such a fantasy."

Yet, he goes on to say, "The only God who ever lived is living still." "...there is a power, a spirit, a presence far beyond our intellectual grasp but utterly alive in human minds, awake in human hearts, and moving us onward to our own fulfillment...."

What is the nature of this God who ever lived? Another Unitarian voice, that of the Rev. John Haynes Holmes, offers this perspective:

...when I say "God" it is poetry and not theology. Nothing that any theologian ever wrote about God has helped me much, but everything that the poets have written about flowers and birds and skies and seas and the saviors of the race and God—whoever God may be—has at one time or another reached my soul!... The theologians gather dust upon the shelves of my library, but the poets are stained with my fingers and blotted with my tears.

Davies said, "We shall weep for the god who never was until we accept the God who forever is." (27)

I say, we shall argue about the gods who never were until we accept the God who forever is:

The Poet of the world, of the universe. The Mystery that reaches out beyond any distance we can imagine; the Love that will not let us go. Everything that is not us, that we do not control. All that engenders and enlivens, that creates and destroys and creates again. All that is us and the vast Otherness that is not us. All that is deeply who we are and can be, all that draws us out of ourselves and connects us to one another. All that we know, and all that we do not, and never will, know. All That Is.

I believe that we come to our churches and their communities, as we come to this place this morning, expecting (to slightly paraphrase what Alice Walker once wrote) to find this God. We expect to discover more the ties that weave us together. We expect to learn more about the intricate patterns of living. We expect a moment, when the awareness of the Presence that looks out from another's eyes allows us to glimpse that greater Presence in which we all live and move and have our deepest being.

May we open our hearts and our minds to these moments—may they be many, and may they immeasurably enrich and ennoble us along our ways.

Amen, and amen.

## References

- F. Forrester Church, *God and Other Famous Liberals*, Simon and Schuster, NY, 1991.
- A. Powell Davies, *The Faith of an Unrepentant Liberal*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1947.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Oversoul*
- Charles H. Lyttle, *The Liberal Gospel*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1925.
- John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, Harper, San Francisco, 1998.

## Prayer

Spirit of Life, God of our hearts and minds:  
we seek You, each of us, out of that profound Uniqueness  
which draws us together in wonder and thankfulness.

We seek You, each of us, in our own ways;  
our words and images revealing both  
our diversity and our commonality,  
our ideas and speculations reflecting both  
our hopes and our aspirations.

In this place, where our individual paths converge,  
we seek an unhurried moment  
to remember and to give thanks:

may we remember that which we often believe  
we will never forget: to be kind to one another,  
willing to seek understanding,  
willing to offer compassion and respect.

may we be thankful for all that blesses us, for all  
that reminds us of how precious each moment is,  
for all that renews in us an abiding astonishment  
that we even live at all.

May we look to Life with humor and humility,  
courage and curiosity,  
along all the roads we may travel,  
alone and together.

Blessed be; amen.