

## READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

People exist in a cosmic setting. Human nature has its ultimate ground. We live in a spiritual environment. We are integral parts of this cosmic creativity—co-creators with it. Yet I suspect the question of the nature of God or Ultimate Reality is an open one for many of us. We know we are part of a cosmic reality greater than ourselves, but we are hard put to name it. For some it is God, for others Nature, or Cosmos, or Being Itself. Some believe that to name it is to diminish it.

Among the more common theological positions regarding God are the following (here I am indebted to Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor for some categories and descriptions—his words in quotes):

**Theism:** belief in a personal God who has will and with whom prayer is a means of communication. Theistic monism holds that “the divine alone is real; the world or nature is at best an illusion or mere appearance.” Theistic dualism holds “the divine is completely transcendent over nature; the divine and nature constitute totally different realms of reality.” Naturalistic theism is the belief that “Nature includes the divine; God or the divine is but one force or process operating in the natural world.”

**Atheism:** active disbelief in the existence of a God or gods. “Nature alone is real; the divine is either an illusion or an imaginative representation or symbol of some aspect of the natural world.”

**Agnosticism:** ultimate uncertainty about the existence of God.

**Humanism:** focus on belief in humanity as central, without divine beings. “A naturalistic and non-theistic interpretation of religion, emphasizing humanly significant actions and experiences.”

**Liberal Christianity:** “Adherence to the Christian tradition, viewed in light of reason and contemporary interpretations of traditional symbols and scriptures.”

**Neopaganism:** “an earth-centered and often polytheistic tradition that sees divinity in everything and emphasizes ritual practices and participatory experience.”

**Pantheism:** equation of God with nature. “The divine and nature are in some sense identical; nature itself is divine.”

**Panentheism:** belief that God is both immanent (active within us) and transcendent (a divine being). “The divine is independent of and transcends nature, but also includes nature.”

**Process Theology:** belief that God is not a being, but a process in which God, by analogy, can be considered the mind of the universe. “A conception of the world as a social organism growing toward fulfillment by means of mutual influences, including the persuasive aims of God.”

**World Religions:** “various forms of response and adaptation to world religions such as Buddhism and Judaism.”

In recent years the patriarchal god of the biblical tradition has been challenged by feminist theology in which the goddess is emphasized. Scholars have discovered or rediscovered a long tradition of female deities. Riane Eisler, for example, in *The Chalice and the Blade*, describes a Mother Goddess or Giver of All. Describing reality as the great cosmic womb, she suggests that the central religious symbol was not man dying on the cross, but woman giving birth. Love of life and not fear of death was dominant in society, art, and culture. She finds these feminine values lead away from the competitive way to the partnership way.

From an earth-centered perspective Starhawk, in *The Spiral Dance*, suggests three basic principles of Goddess religion: immanence, interconnection, and community. Immanence suggests the divine is within nature; as we are in nature, we are part of the divine and have responsibility for helping to preserve life on earth. Interconnection points to the cosmos as

one living organism of which we are a part. "What affects one of us affects us all." Goddess religion is lived in community—its focus is not individual salvation, but growth that comes through human interaction and cooperation. This community includes not only its human members, but all plants and animals and systems that compose the earth. Clearly Eisler and Starhawk speak to the Unitarian Universalist concern for the "interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

In the *Christian Century*, Shirley Ann Ranck puts this case for feminist spirituality:

[It] identifies the goddess with Ultimate Reality rather than with the supernatural and seeks power in harmony rather than in dominance. . . . I am not at all interested in substituting a female parent for a male parent as a deity. But I am very much interested in reclaiming the thousands of years of human religious history which preceded the rise of patriarchal religions, a history in which female images of the divine were supreme. We need to honor that history before we can claim any wholeness for the future.

Liberation theology (feminist, black, Latino, Asian, among others) posits a much more political deity. Here we find God's option for the poor and the oppressed. This is a liberator God who, having led Moses and the Hebrew people from the evil clutches of the Pharaoh, now promises to work with justice-seeking people to liberate people from today's oppression of poverty, environmental degradation, and dehumanization in a technological world. While this God of Liberation does not guarantee victory, it is clearly a God who takes sides. Liberation theology poses an interesting predicament for Unitarian Universalists who tend to be the "haves" of society, not the "have nots" to whom the God of Liberation appeals. For a good discussion of the implications of liberation theology on Unitarian Universalism, see *A Reason for Hope: Liberation Theology Confronts a Liberal Faith* by Fredric John Muir (see Selected Bibliography on page 95).

What a striking contrast Goddess and liberation theology make with the historical, tra-

ditional, and often abstract understandings of deity. Historically, there have been a number of so-called "proofs" for the existence of God, logical exercises that lead one to believe. Here are some of the more common "proofs," drawing heavily on former Associated Press religion writer George Cornell.

**Ontological:** This is the argument from being itself. We are unique among creatures in realizing the limits of our being. In short, we are finite beings. But we have been created and there must be some Infinity beyond us that can create. This is, as Cornell says, "an immediately experienced, existential pointer to God." We are anxious about the end of our being, not only dying itself but having to die—to be no more. We can understand this "nonbeing" only by looking at it from a transcendent perspective of the Infinite—God—the Ground of Being.

**Cosmological:** We live in an observable world of cause and effect. If this chain of cause and effect could be traced back to its beginning, there must have been a first "uncaused cause"—God. Similarly, since movement requires prior movement to produce it, there must have been an origin to the process, the first "prime mover"—God. The complex, intricate, and apparently orderly design of the universe from atom to star could not have resulted from random events; it required some infinitely intelligent planner—God. All sciences are utterly dependent on this orderliness. We live in an imperfect world, but how do we know it is imperfect? Because we have the idea of Perfection; the fact of the good implies there must be the best—God. There is a contingent quality in nature—things could either be or not be. Since we observe that things do exist, there must be something to create anything out of nothing, thus making necessary something that always has being—God.

**Moral:** Inherent within us is a sense of moral law (the good, the right), of oughtness, a voice of conscience that in some cases may demand sacrifice of our self-interest, safety,

or even survival for the sake of something better. This cannot be explained merely by biology or psychology, since it may contradict them. But it is very real. It seems to be a universal reality. It can be taught, but where do the teachers get it? Since it transcends the human, it must be superhuman—God. It is illustrated by the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative" to universalize the highest good, the "summum bonum"—God.

**Teleological:** *Telos* means purpose. There appears to be purpose in the universe; even evolution seems to move in a distinct direction, always toward higher and more complex forms. That goal is what the noted paleontologist and Catholic scholar Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called the "Omega Point"—God. This parallels the scientific concept of a dynamic and ever evolving cosmos. This cosmic purpose has been caught up in process theology which understands all reality as a great process, equally open to error and human evil, as well as to newness and novelty. This process God is not simply a past Creator, but is ahead of humanity, drawing us forward in hope and promise toward a new future.

One can question each of these "proofs" of God in terms of the assumptions made. We can argue with them because they project human ideas, feelings, desires, and will on an infinite cosmic screen. Is there really purpose in the cosmos, or merely a magnificent but undifferentiated process of trial and error? Was Creation intended or simply a fortuitous cosmic accident? Who can know? Is there such a thing as The Good, or is that merely human wishful thinking? Was there a beginning at all, or is Ultimate Reality more cyclical in nature?

Paul Rasor has recently suggested that liberal theology has moved away from the authority of institutions and traditions and toward the internal authority of the individual. There is a strong emphasis on human reason in which everything is subject to criticism. The emphasis has been on God as immanent, toward a monistic view of nature as one process, and an understanding that truth changes

over time. The language of science and philosophy has come to be preferred over myth and story. There has been more emphasis on the cognitive over the affective dimensions of experience.

However, this pattern is changing as affective and experiential dimensions of liberal religion challenge objective rationality for supremacy among us. We are increasingly less concerned with answering the question of the existence of God or responding to proofs of God and much more concerned that religious liberals of all ages have experiences that may be called divine. Many are today more comfortable articulating the *experience* of the sacred than the *existence* or *non-existence* of a divine being.

It may be that the most valuable function Unitarian Universalist religious education can perform is asking the right questions about Ultimate Reality: Is it benign? Does it have a will of its own? Does it intervene in human affairs? Does it make any difference in our lives? We may not succeed in answering all of our questions. The provisional answers we have found may only serve to raise a whole set of new questions. In some ways we may feel as confused as ever, but perhaps we will be confused on a higher level and about more important things.

It may be that God is not a noun, but a verb, as feminist Mary Daly suggests. The word "God" may not refer to any being up there or out there or even in there, but to a divine process of which we are a part. It may be that we experience the divine in relational power—that it is created out of the gathering of people in worship or in pursuit of a noble cause.

I think of the simple story of a conversation between the priest and the peasant while viewing the latter's fine garden. "You and the Lord," said the priest, "have worked well here." The peasant then said to the priest, "You should have seen the place when the Lord had it alone."

## Background Reading

Adams, James Luther. *On Being Human Religiously*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1986, pp. 91–101.