

This is the printed text of my sermon. In delivering it, I added or omitted a few items, but this version is close to my actual presentation. – Rev. Chris Schriner

Bridging the God Gap
Wiesbaden Unitarian Universalists, July 19, 2015
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A few years ago I picked up the morning paper and saw an alarming headline: “Stark Gives Confession.” It was about U.S. Representative Pete Stark. “What is Stark confessing?” I wondered. Embezzlement? X-rated hanky-panky? No. He simply stated that he does not believe in God. If he hadn’t been in a solidly safe Congressional seat, that admission could have ended his political career.

Atheists are one of the most widely-despised groups in this country. A study² comparing various stigmatized groups showed that people “rate atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, gays and lesbians ... in ‘sharing their vision of American society.’” “Many ... associated atheism with ... criminal behavior ... rampant materialism and cultural elitism ... self-interested individuals who are not concerned with the common good.”

So we’re talking about *elitist, materialistic criminals!* Can’t you just picture roving bands of atheist thugs, sneering behind their horn-rimmed glasses, breaking into ritzy restaurants to steal cases of French cognac?

When I was growing up, the big Webster’s Dictionary in our house defined “atheist” as “One who disbelieves or denies the existence of a God ... [or] *one who lives immorally* as if disbelieving in God.”³ No wonder many atheists call themselves “humanist” or “agnostic.” Agnosticism means not knowing whether a deity exists, but it can also mean, “I’m an atheist but I don’t want people to hate me.”

In this intensely anti-atheist nation, how astonishing that in UU congregations believers and non-believers sit peacefully side by side! Nevertheless, even within our movement theists and atheists may find it awkward to communicate about theology. This morning I hope to help make communication easier, by showing that believing in God and denying that God exists are sometimes much more similar than one might think. In fact, theists and atheists are often “siblings in disguise.”

My thoughts about this issue were shaped by a personal life-crisis which turned out to be an amazing opportunity. In my early twenties, I had the unusual experience of being able to *identify with both theism and atheism at the same time*. I had grown up with a sense of continuous daily communion with God, but in college I began to question whether there was anyone present except myself as I sat silently in the Prayer Room at the University of Redlands Chapel. And so I began to incline toward atheism.

For a while I was so evenly balanced between believing and disbelieving that I could see either side with equal clarity. It was as if I were perched high on a mountaintop. If I sat facing East I saw one valley, if I turned West I saw the other, *and both were equally visible*. I discovered that we can think about the universe in terms of either theism or atheism. But people typically build their theological houses on one side of the mountain or the other. They either believe or disbelieve because that is the only side of reality they are able to see.

So how can we bring both sides of this great big mountain together? My first suggestion is that *belief or disbelief in God is often just a matter of wordplay*, how we decide to use words. It’s easy to focus more on words

¹ Based upon *Bridging the God Gap: Finding Common Ground Among Believers, Atheists and Agnostics*, by Dr. Chris Schriner, available from Amazon.com.

² *American Sociological Review*, April 2007.

³ Italics added. And did you know that at one time “An atheist was ... disqualified as a witness, and in England could not [sit in] the House of Commons”? (*Webster’s New International Dictionary, 2d Edition*)

than on the reality that words point to. If we look beyond words we will see that dividing the world into theists and atheists is much too simple.

For example, let's say George is a Presbyterian. He sees God as the creative force that brought the universe into being, and then let it operate by itself through the laws of nature. His God doesn't perform miracles or answer prayers. He realizes his theology is unorthodox, but like many other Christians he loves his church even though he doesn't agree with all of the doctrines. When his minister talks about having a personal relationship with Our Father in Heaven, George sees this as a poetic way of speaking. In a poetic sense I have a personal "relationship" with Mother Earth, even though the Earth is not literally a female parent. George's relationship with God is a lot like that.

Compare George to Janine. Janine has been an atheist for many years. She likes to read Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins and she tells her friends that the idea of God is actually destructive. But Janine believes that life is an educational process. Good or bad things occur in order to teach us lessons that are useful to us personally. She doesn't have any theory about how that happens, but she says this idea is validated by her own life-experience. "Things happen, to teach me what I need to know," she says.

OK, which one is the believer and which one is the evil infidel? George's belief system fits what has been called deism, meaning that God created the universe but now lets it run on its own without needing to intervene any further. By contrast, Janine does believe there are forces for good that intervene in our lives. If Janine used the word "god" to speak of whatever is teaching her important lessons, she would be a theist. Since she does not, she's an atheist.

A great many people have similar beliefs, but disagree about whether to use theistic language. For example, many people believe in some sort of positive force, but they don't necessarily think of it as an invisible person who communicates with us and works miracles. According to a Gallup poll, around 30 percent of those who live in North America think of God as "some sort of spirit or life force" and *not* as an invisible person.⁴ Well, you can call a life force God, or you can just call it a life force. And worldwide, *only 45 percent* believe in a personal deity.⁵

Within Unitarian Universalism many of us identify God with an aspect of the natural world. For example, some UUs define God as the love that connects human beings. Obviously love exists. But not everyone calls it God.

So my first suggestion is that the difference between theism and atheism may be just a matter of the way we use words, especially for those who think of God as an impersonal force or an aspect of the natural world. My second suggestion is much more radical. I even see a kinship between atheists and *personal theists*, and by personal theists I mean those who believe that god is a person who thinks, feels, acts, and communicates.

Here is an idea that breaks down the rigid wall between personal theism and atheism: *When religion says that God is a person, this statement is often meant symbolically or poetically rather than literally.*

Notice that even though Christianity describes God as a person, it also says God radically transcends human understanding. And yet very few religious leaders seem to notice the tension between saying that our minds cannot comprehend God and then describing deity in detailed, personal terms. A theologian or a preacher may say, "God is entirely beyond human comprehension – and now let me tell you all about the Lord. God is eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful, the creator of the universe, perfect in every way, 100% loving and fair; and God does all

⁴ This was drawn from the International Millennium Survey, which studied religious attitudes in sixty countries all over the world. Worldwide, 45% thought of God as a person and 30% thought of God as "some sort of spirit or life force." 25% don't fall into either category. <http://www.gallup-international.com/survey15.htm>.

⁵ See <http://www.gallup-international.com/survey15.htm>.

the personal things that we do, such as thinking, feeling, and acting.” Do you see the contradiction? Even when we sense that there are realities far beyond us, we want to think we grasp those realities. *We humans want so much to relate to the Great Mystery that we forget it is a Mystery.* So we decorate the divine darkness with elaborate doctrinal details.

Obviously in at least some respects, describing deity as a person is a poetic way of speaking. A typical person has a certain sort of body, but a being that created the universe would probably not possess toes or a pancreas. And what does it mean that God thinks? For us thinking involves our brains. If God has no physical brain, how does this being process information? Listen to this stunningly insightful statement from Isaiah 55: “... my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” So how can we understand what it *means* that God thinks? Is “thinking” even the right word?

Similarly, what does it mean that God loves us? Does God care in specific ways about specific people, or more like the Earth “loves” the creatures that live on it, by being a generally supportive environment for living things?

So some who speak of God as a person are using this familiar concept poetically to speak of what is beyond our understanding. Many atheists, of course, would not use personalistic language to describe ultimate reality. But I have also met atheists who do speak of the universe as having personal characteristics, at least metaphorically speaking. So here are four ways that some atheists have compared the cosmos to persons:

First of all, persons *think*, and some scientists see the universe’s order and lawful functioning as a kind of intelligence. The astronomer James Jeans said, “The universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine.”

Second, persons have *conscious awareness*, and some atheists such as Sam Harris believe that everything may be aware, in some important respects. This idea is called panpsychism.

Persons also *communicate* and so does the universe, in either a poetic or literal sense. At times events and circumstances seem to speak to us quite forcefully, warning us or encouraging us. And there are many atheists and agnostics who believe that reality responds to our messages. Henry Stone, for example, has stated: “Although it’s not part of the usual definition of atheism, I believe all our actions, words, and thoughts affect the structure of the universe. Our effect may be vanishingly small, but when many people act or think in unison, the effect is multiplied many times.”⁶

Some non-believers try to influence future events by “sending out a positive intention,” “holding a good thought,” or visualizing favorable results. This is somewhat similar to prayer, even if you’re not going down on your knees.

If you believe in God and you have an in-depth conversation with a Unitarian Universalist atheist, don’t be too surprised if he or she states that the universe manifests a self-organizing intelligence, or says it is conscious in ways that science does not yet understand, or that it may even respond to human communications.

Both theists and atheists, then, may think of reality in personal terms. Theists usually apply personal descriptions more literally, but there is no clear dividing line between literal and metaphorical language. *Poetry and factual description shade off into each other.*

Another way to find common ground is to focus on how little we know about Ultimate Reality. In a debate between atheist Daniel Dennett and Dinesh D’Souza, who is a theist, D’Souza noted that God’s existence has not

⁶ Henry Stone, cited by Tom Owen-Towle, *Wrestling With God*, p. 148.

been proven. And in that sense, he suggested, both he and Dennett are agnostics. He said: "I don't know, and still I believe. Dan doesn't know, and therefore, he doesn't believe. What unites us is both of us don't know. We're actually both ignorant. We are both reasoning in the dark."⁷

Yes, we are all just staring off into the infinite unknown. There is some evidence that this great abyss of mystery has personal qualities, and there is also evidence against personal theism. So we make our choice – yes, there is an invisible person hidden in the darkness; or no, there is not.

When we say God thinks and feels, we are trying to make familiar clothing fit an Enigma whose size and shape we cannot discern. If we clothe the Great Mystery with god-language, we are theists. If we do not use such language, we are the dreaded atheists – self-centered, materialistic, criminal. To divide up the world this way is simplistic and destructive.

Theism and atheism are spiritual wagers about the nature of Reality, leaps of faith, or leaps into unbelief. *But mystery-affirming theists and mystery-affirming atheists* are brothers and sisters in disguise.

I want to consider another unifying idea that is easily stated but very important: *All of us, theists, atheists, and agnostics, can dedicate our lives to something greater than ourselves.* For some this means obedience to the will of God. But those who do not believe in God can devote themselves to another high purpose, such as allegiance to a set of core values. I think of Chris Stedman of the Harvard Humanist Community, who promotes theist-atheist cooperation in building a better world, as he discusses in a book called *Faithiest*.

The crucial disagreement is not between belief and unbelief. It's between those who are committed to a larger purpose and those who are unconcerned with the common good. Deep down we long to grow toward something larger and more lasting than ourselves, something that calls forth the best we can be. That is probably why some of you joined this congregation.

When I think of focusing on the common good, I think of Frank Powell. Frank was the father of Jean Brookhart, a member of Orange Coast UU Church in Costa Mesa, California, and Jean suspected that her dad was an agnostic. Frank was a dedicated humanitarian, who founded the first bureau for handicapped children in Wisconsin. When at last he was on his deathbed a local minister came by and asked him, "Frank, have you made your peace with God?" Echoing the Unitarian Henry David Thoreau, the old man replied, "As far as I know, I have not quarreled with him." "Well then," said the pastor, "are you confident that your soul will attain salvation?" "Reverend, I've spent my life up to this point thinking about other people and I'm not going to start worrying about myself now."

At the funeral, that minister said he had to respect a man who could give those answers. Perhaps he sensed spiritual maturity in the old agnostic, Frank Powell.

So the difference between theism and atheism is sometimes just a difference in the way we like to use words, and even those who believe in a personal deity may see this as a poetic metaphor for hidden realities beyond our understanding. Certainly there can be important differences between believing or not believing in a personal God. *But belief and disbelief can gather in love, on the common ground of Mystery.*

Closing Words:

Whether I am an accident of nature
Or the design of a god,
It is I who must give dignity to my life
If I am to be worthy of the design
Or build upon the accident. – the Rev. Nick Cardell

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw7J15TeDG4&feature=PlayList>.