

# DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD? (Here It's Not Required)

A Sermon Delivered at  
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist  
New Member Sunday, April 11, 2010  
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

First Reading

*Tao Te Ching I*

Lao Tse

The Tao that can be described is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.  
Nameless is the source of all creation;  
Naming is the origin of particular things.  
Freed from desire, you can see the hidden mystery of all.  
By having desire, you can see only what is at hand.  
Mystery and the reality here at hand come from the same source.  
But his source is beyond all naming.  
Together we call them the Tao,  
the gateway to deeper understanding.

Second Reading

from *A House for Hope:  
The Promise of Progressive Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Rebecca Parker

[T]he question, “Does God exist?” arises . . . not as a cool inquiry into the nature of ultimate reality. It arises among the communities of those lacking bare necessities. It arises among the lonely, the frightened, and those without voice. In such settings, the question is not about metaphors or about rational arguments. It is more elemental. It is a question borne in the suffering souls of human beings, and its meaning is a cry for hope: Is there any help for pain? Is there anything that will spring green from this bitter winter . . . Is there any hope for the disempowered and silenced? The abandoned? And when everything human fails, and nothing that is within the power of human beings to do can be done, what then? *Does God exist?* Is there a source of healing and transformation . . . ?

The fundamental question then is an existential one, not merely an intellectual exercise.

Offertory Words

Judith Meyer

Anne Sexton wrote:

*“Look to your heart/ that flutters in and out like a moth.  
God is not indifferent to your need.  
You have a thousand prayers but God has one.”*

Dear God we give thanks for those moments when we can feel that we live  
in a world that is not indifferent to our need.

We all have so many needs – a thousand prayers—a thousand needs –  
that really only need one answer: let the world not be indifferent.

And may we live and be with each other in the way that shows this truth  
whatever the day brings: that neither are we indifferent to each other.

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The curtain was drawn across the middle of the room – a double room in a skilled nursing facility specializing in recovery and physical therapy. It was about eleven o'clock at night. The two women in the room had only met one another briefly that afternoon, and chatted over dinner.

One was our member Charlotte Gilson, who serves on our Membership Committee. No, she's not here this morning. She is still in that very room, still in rehab almost two months after a surgery that had to be repeated. But she gave me her permission to tell you this story.

She was just drifting off to sleep when her new roommate spoke up across the curtain: "Do you believe in God?" the other woman asked.

It was not a question Charlotte was expecting. She had to think for a moment or three: "Do I *what*?"

"Do you believe in *God*?" her roommate repeated.

Now Charlotte has been a good Unitarian Universalist for more than forty years, I know. I first met her in 1971. I was a student minister at the Unitarian Church in Summit, New Jersey. Charlotte was chairing the religious education committee. Five years ago, as serendipity would have it, she retired to Fox Hill Village, in Westwood, to be closer to her grandchildren in Sharon. I do a monthly discussion group there, and she soon joined here. I know why the roommate felt comfortable asking such an existential question of a woman she had only just met. Charlotte is the kind of person who exudes just openness, interest in others, and resilience in the face of life's challenges. If you've not met her, you're in for a treat. When she recovers and comes back to us, *insh'allah*, as Muslims would say.

“God?” said Charlotte. “Do I believe in God? Well . . . you’d first have to tell me what you mean by ‘God.’ Do you mean what I would call the traditional idea of God – bearded, male, up in heaven, ruling over everything? Answering some prayers and not others?”

“I guess that *is* what I meant,” the other woman said.

“Then my answer is No,” Charlotte replied. “Does that shock you? Because I’m also not sure that’s the only God there is.”

There was silence for a moment. “Shock me? No. Actually, I’m relieved; because I don’t believe in that god either. But I was told that I just *had* to. Or else be punished. And now I don’t. And I wonder if that’s what’s happening.”

I won’t try to repeat the conversation much further, because Charlotte didn’t when she told me about it a few days later, when I visited. The woman had been raised Roman Catholic. But she had long since decided that she could not, would not go back to that religious tradition - for a variety of reasons. But no one had ever before helped her realize that there might be more than one way to talk about God, meaning, hope, and spiritual connection in the face of mortality.

Before she was discharged, just hours before my visit, Charlotte had fulfilled the liberal evangelical spirit of our Universalist forebears by suggesting that she might want to seek out one of the Unitarian Universalist congregations near her home south of here, and call the minister or go to a service. Where does one find hope if the traditional god as a source of hope has died?

Earlier in the chapter of our new book from which Molly read, Rebecca Parker writes, “For the past two hundred years, theologians have been wrestling with theism – deconstructing image after image of God that has functioned idolatrously and oppressively. Progressive theology has dethroned God as king, undone God the father, exposed the fallacy of God as white, as male, as straight, as able-bodied, as “Unmoved Mover,” and more. As early as the 1960s, theologians were announcing the death of God. In the name of justice and liberation, theologians themselves have brought about God’s demise and conducted the funeral.”

But here we are a week after Easter. And if there is one meaning of that day that I did not explore last week, it is this one: there have been plenty of attempts to nail down the definition of the divine, as it were. You can kill “god” that way – for a time. But the real source of hope and new life will not stay dead. The various names given to God demonstrably do die.

“Recently,” Rebecca goes on, “books arguing for atheism have been high on the best-seller charts. But as Chris Hedges points out in his countering book, *I Don’t Believe in Atheism*, the new atheists [all-too-often] mirror the fundamentalist habits of mind they rail against, and they betray a shocking ignorance of the serious cross-examination of God that has been underway [since Job] – as an act of faith by [serious] people of faith. . . The 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian Theodore Parker put it well: the goodness of God is manifest in that God has given humanity the power to judge [even] God.”

“‘God,’ said my late friend Forrest Church, “is not really God’s name. ‘God’ is *our* name – for that which is present in each, yet greater than all.”

When people would come to him tell him that they were attracted to our form of open-minded, compassionate, practical religion, but could not join the church, because they were not sure that they believed in God, Forrest would ask such people to describe to him in more detail this god they did not believe in. And when they finished with that caricature, he’d simply say, “Well, of course, I don’t believe in such a god either. But I don’t think that ends the question. And where else can you have a serious conversation about what does inspire, draw, and give meaning to your life, especially when other things seem to be falling apart?”

“Present in each, yet greater than all.”

In our new book, which, like my last book, *Understanding the Bible*, addresses itself to *Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals*, Rebecca and I do not espouse any otherworldly supernaturalism. Rather we try to show that the broad framework of liberal or progressive social thinking comes from answering a set of classic theological questions in ways that the lady on the other side of the curtain had almost certainly never really thought of as religious responses.

In this theology, it is not the image or name of God that matters so much as the effect of that image on our human action. “A person will worship something – have no doubt of that,” said Emerson. It may be an ego-ideal, a fetish of idealized family life, an image of human beauty, power, or personal success. Conversely, it may be a somewhat masochistic image of noble self-sacrifice, heroism, or devotion. Or, more likely, a small pantheon of such idolatrous images, cast up by the media on a rotating basis.

“We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts,” Emerson went on, “but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

In our tradition, we have not ceased from exploring what it means to find the *imago dei*, the image of the divine, even in people we do not immediately admire, or like, or understand – hoping only that they may see in us those who are less interested in asserting an *idea* about what ultimately matters than in discovering, here and now, together, something of its reality in a transforming interaction that stimulates us to live, grow, give and share more fully and deeply.

To paraphrase one of our own theologians, we *undergo* such growth; we can’t coerce it. The will and the intelligence can’t do it because it is the various dimensions of our intelligence – emotional, moral, creative, spiritual, as well as cognitive – that grow. We undergo such growth the way a plant in spring takes sunshine, air, water, and earth in order to flower. We can make more choices than garden plants. We can seek out places and groups can help stimulate such growth, where we can yield ourselves to the transforming power of a wider, deeper wisdom.

This is the purpose of congregations. Like Shug, in the novel, *The Color Purple*, we may not find God in church, however, unless we bring god in with us; unless we bring something of the transcendent or of our hunger for transcendence to be nurtured. Asked why he went to church every Sunday, the great Unitarian physician and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes replied, “I seem to have within my soul a plant called reverence that needs watering once a week.”

Here we can even be reverently irreverent, recognizing that there are many gods worth not bowing down to, even as we seek together to remember that within all the difficulties of life, there is something persistently good, even beautiful, beautiful and as ever-renewing as spring.

We need not think alike to love alike. But may our shared search for that which draws us into creative living and community draw us into an ever deeper covenant of diversity. Amen.

\*Hymn 2

*Down the Ages We Have Trod*

Storey/Benjamin

Benediction 700