

The History of God

*Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tracy Springberry
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People will ask from time to time, as I'm sure you know, "Do you believe in God?"

For a long time, when I was younger, this seemed pretty straight forward. "Well," I would say, "it depends what you mean by the God, but I believe in some kind of force in the universe. You know," I'd laugh, "like Star Wars."

However, after I'd started attending a Unitarian Universalist church, and started to attend more to the spiritual dimension of life, that seemed like a lie sort of, a force in the universe, didn't really describe the depth and richness I felt in the world. It didn't explain the moments of complete grace I'd experienced, or the few times I'd felt something beyond me that had provided guidance and direction and comfort. It didn't take into account all the reading I'd done about other people's spiritual and religious lives.

So once, just to try it out, when someone asked whether I believed in God, I said, "yes," without a qualification.

This person, not a religious person, virtually exploded in my face, in a rage. "You believe in supernatural being that controls things?"

"Well, no," I said, completely taken aback. "Of course, not. Who said anything about a supernatural controlling being? How can anything be unnatural? Isn't that a contradiction in terms?"

When I mentioned this to some friends, they said with serious exasperation, "When people say God, they mean a supernatural being who controls things. They mean an old white

guy in the sky. Don't pretend there are other meanings, because really there aren't. You knew what you were saying "yes" to."

I found this equally exasperating. While I knew some Unitarian Universalists believed this, I knew a lot who didn't. I knew lots of other religious people who didn't think that either. Hadn't anyone read *History of God* by Karen Armstrong? It is clear in that book. Well, I think, someone pointed out to me, most people don't read books like the *History of God*, since it is a 400 page, very dense overview of all the different ways God has been perceived in the three Abrahamic religions since, well, Abraham himself.

I agreed that might be true, as fascinating as I had found it. Because, as much as I hated to admit it, those who claimed every person in North America thinks the word "God" means a supernatural being who controls things, does seem to be right when it comes to the public debate on God. The fundamentalist, literal Christians, who have such a loud voice in public debate, seem to believe in a God that can cause hurricanes and other natural disasters if He doesn't like Gays or abortion or whatever they have determined this angry person-like being doesn't like. The atheist camp seems to *not* believe in this very same entity.

God, I wanted people to know, has been conceived in so many ways and that Old White Guy in the Sky certainly has *not* been the most interesting or meaningful. Maybe, I said, we needed to start talking about a different God. Maybe it would make a difference in the public sphere.

So - just what have people thought about God over the last 4,000 years? How have people imagined God?

Well, in the beginning, there were many Gods.

People felt deeply all the unseen forces of the world. They felt what we call natural forces, such as wind or the changing of the seasons, and also something else, we moderns don't feel much, an electric vibrancy that made the whole world alive and awake.

To more fully participate in this unseen, but felt, world, ancient people personalized these forces and made them into Gods. These Gods filled the landscape – the sky, earth, trees, water, everything. The Gods were not perfect. They were sometimes good and sometimes bad. They were powerful. People entered into relationships with these Gods through ritual, sacrifice, and prayer to better connect with the world around them.

Then, one of these old Gods transformed into God unlike any of the previous Gods.

At first Yahweh was just Sky God and like any Sky God of the ancient religions, he did things. He had human emotions and reactions. He was frequently cranky and angry. However, he didn't stay in one place. Previously Gods did not move around. People might, but Gods stayed put and if people moved they worshipped the Gods of a new place. Yahweh, however, moved with Abraham and his descendants and made the Israelites own people. He was like a Father. He loved his people and looked out for them, rescuing them from Egypt and helping them conquer lands of their own. He also commanded loyalty and punished them when he felt it would get them back on track.

Then Yahweh changed again and became, not just a Sky God and Father God, but a God of Justice. In Psalm 82, he declared. "No more mockery of justice, No more favoring the wicked! Let the weak and the orphan have justice, be fair to the wretched and the destitute, rescue the weak and needy, save them from the clutches of the wicked!"

Then Yahweh changed again and became One and Only God of the Jewish people, who after years of worshipping Him plus other Gods, finally embraced Yahweh as their One and Only God. All other Gods ceased to exist.

Meanwhile, the Greek philosophers to the west also found a one and only God.

The Greek Philosophers, tired of the old nature religions, discovered God in the mind. For them, God was an unchanging being outside of the world. God was not like a person. God was pure perfection and did not change, because change would mar perfection. God could not create or act, since these are movement and movement is change. Instead God emitted perfection so we could experience its distant reflection. God was spirit and reason. He had no physical presence. Humans were completely unlike God, but could united with God through the use of reason.

Jesus worshipped the God of Israel, the One God, who acted on the behalf of his people in the world. After Jesus preached in Galilee and was killed in Jerusalem, small churches revering him and his teachings appeared all over the Roman Empire. These churches were not unified. They did not have similar theologies or read the same Gospels.

One new Christian theology taught that the Old Testament God was a dreadful, cruel God and New Testament God was a completely different God who was all good. This theology taught that people should turn away from the world which was created by the bad God and toward the good God. The good God, it turned out was very similar to the God of the Greek Philosophers. In fact, many of the new Christian theologies transformed the Yahweh of the Old Testament into someone similar to the God of the Greek philosophers, and by the time

Christianity was a more unified religion, their God, while still active in the world, was a more distant and perfect God than the God of the Old Testament.

While Yahweh was growing distant, Jesus Christ was becoming divine. He had started as man in the new Christian churches, but by the 3rd century, most believers felt he was at least part divine. Christians also believed in the divinity the Holy Spirit.

But wasn't that three Gods? If so, was Christianity still monotheistic? These were serious concerns. People fought bitterly. Some were excommunicated and banished.

In the end, Western and Eastern parts of the Christian church arrived at separate solutions to the problem.

Their solutions point to two very distinct ways that people in monotheistic faiths have come to understand God.

The Eastern Christian Church decided people were not meant to understand how God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit could be separate but also one. The question was not meant to be answered, but meditated on, like a Buddhist roan. Its intent was to pull people into the unknowable mystery of God.

The Eastern Christian tradition saw God as unknowable. They believed that whenever a person tried to understand God intellectually, they necessarily defined God. However, God was beyond definition. People could only *experience* God through worship, ritual, prayer and other spiritual practices.

The Western Christian Church, on the other hand, decided God could be understood, at least partly, intellectually. God had three aspects – The Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, and these were the faces of God.

This horrified the Eastern church who said the West had made God into a person. While people in the Western Church also believed in God's mystery, Western theologians were a rational group, who found concrete understanding to be a meaningful way to approach the mystery of God.

The God of the Western Church was an actual Being, who had the characteristics of Beings. The Eastern Church thought this was blasphemous. This basic difference in understanding of God was one of the many reasons the Western Latin Catholic church split from the Eastern Orthodox Church.

While the Christian Church fought its theological battles, to the east in Arabia, Muhammad listened as God dictated the Koran to him and began the third Abrahamic monotheistic faith.

The God of Islam clearly acted in the world. However, he was more distant than the early God of the Jewish people. The Koran said, "He is the One God; God, the Eternal, the unCaused Cause of all being. He begets not, and neither is he begotten and there is nothing that could be compared to him." This God was incomprehensible. However, he did enter into relationship with people, and allowed people to glimpse Him through the Koran and through nature.

As Islam developed into a serious religious faith, the Arabs conquered a huge Empire and for a long time were the world leaders in the creation of knowledge including science.

In this environment, religious leaders and philosophers struggled with the same question that the problem of the Trinity had brought up in the Christian church. Was God knowable through reason and logic?

Many Islamic thinkers said, yes; but others irrevocably said no. The faith divided into sects with different approaches to their faith.

Al-Ghazzali lived around 1000 CE and his explorations of God influenced the future flow of both Islamic and Jewish thought. Al-Ghazzali was the most esteemed University lecturer at that time, and he thought logically and scientifically. He wanted to prove objectively, with science that God was real in order to prove religious traditions were not delusions.

He wrote, "I have poked into every dark recess. I have made an assault on every problem. I have plunged into every abyss. I have scrutinized the creed of every sect. I have tried to lay bare the inmost doctrines of every community. All this I have done that I might distinguish between true and false, between sound tradition and heretical innovation."

He believed his soul and the souls of all people depended on his work, but he could not prove God objectively. After many, many years of such work, he had a complete breakdown.

He could not speak. However, he continued to go to class. He would open his mouth, but could not make his tongue and throat form a single word. He fell into a deep, deep depression. Desperate, al-Ghazzali resigned from the University, and joined the Sufis, one of the mystical branches of Islam. He lived as a Sufi for ten years. He healed and came to believe the only true way to know God was through religious experience. One needed reason to not behave ridiculously, of course, but reason alone could never prove God, while mystical experience could.

He explained that people belonged in both the physical and spiritual world. People could understand the world both rationally and spiritually. We could learn about the spiritual dimension through mystical experience where we could have a direct experience of God. Then it was only through imagination that we could express what we discovered in these experiences.

The only languages to express religious experience were mythology, religious symbols, and poetry.

Over the following centuries, Islam, Judaism, and Eastern Christianity all developed strong mystical traditions. The mystics claimed both that God is All and that God is Nothing.

They said, “God has a 1,000 names and God has no name.” One mystic wrote,

“Oh Light that none can name, for it is altogether nameless...

O Light with many names, for it is at work in all things...

How do you mingle yourself with grass?

How, while continuing unchanged, altogether inaccessible,

Do you preserve the nature of grass unconsumed?”

The mystics said God was both fully beyond us and fully within us. God was completely unknowable, but could be experienced in our own souls.

Religious traditions developed simple practices that could help people experience God. One purpose was to help people understand God as a transforming, all-consuming presence rather than a Being like a person. Many religious followers came to understand scripture and other religious texts as metaphors pointing to a reality beyond the sensory, rational experience.

Western Christianity made very different decisions about how to understand God.

From the earliest theological writings, Western thinkers tended to see God as a Being. He was Being different than other sorts of Beings, but a Being none-the-less. He had gender, feelings, and a sense of how things should be.

During the Reformation, Calvinists argued that Christianity should be coherent and rational, and so should God. They spoke of “God’s will” as if God made decisions like we do.

The Philosophers of the Western Enlightenment believed God was knowable through reason and the senses as was every part of the world. In order to find this God, they read the Bible as a literal, not metaphorical, text and stripped God of all mystery. Until the Enlightenment, the monotheistic traditions didn't consider the creation story in Genesis as central to of their faith. Suddenly, this story was very important. It was a way to correlate new scientific understandings with the Biblical stories. These thinkers made God the originator of the Universe, as this was a convenient place for Him in their new cosmology. Later when scientific understanding conflicted with a literal interpretation of Genesis, it became difficult for many people to take the Bible seriously.

In fact once people began analyzing with reason the literal Bible and person-like God, it didn't take long for people in the West to start declaring God did not exist. In Unitarianism, the time from when William Channing publicly applied reason to the Bible and declared Jesus a man, until large numbers of Unitarians began disavowing a God was about 60 years. Two hundred years later people in Western countries continue to move away from religious belief and practice.

I find this an incredibly sad story. I was raised to not believe in the supernatural being that so many people in Western Christianity have accepted as God. This was and is fine with me. I am a well-educated Westerner. I like reason and logic and ideas you can get your brain around. A supernatural and controlling being made no sense, and not believing in it has seemed no particular loss.

However, I do believe, because of my experience and the experiences of others that al-Ghazzali was right; human beings are capable of understanding the world both rationally and spiritually. They are different ways of knowing.

When Western Christianity time and time again chose to define God as a Being who could be objectively known, they left an important, meaningful part of the human experience behind. We lost the unexplainable mysterious God that wraps the world in love and dances in our soul. We lost mystery. We lost the transformative power of the divine that culture after culture has experience as real and meaningful.

Unitarian Universalists have always been proud to call ourselves a rational, reasonable faith. This is great and important. However, we also claim as a source of our faith, “the direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that uphold life.” This language is our way of pointing toward the God of mystics.

Maybe it is time for Unitarian Universalists to be known not just as a reasonable faith, but as one that reminds ourselves and the our larger culture that holy and divine are present in the world and in that knowing, their transforming power can be as meaningful and important as rational scientific thought. However, the divine and holy are not Beings, but the experience of the wonderful, unfathomable interconnectedness of all things.

I imagine living in a time when people never asked each other whether they believed in God, but would instead ask, have you experienced God? What was that like for you?

In fact, I have, I would say, and tell about a time in the woods as a child and being called to church.

Because what I really want is for every person to be to experience the transcending mystery and wonder that fill this world. I don't want the narrowing of the divine to the Old White Guy in the Sky to stop anyone from being as human and alive as they can be, by shutting them away from the divine completely.

I want life to be vivid with the energy of the holy, of God, of the Spirit of Life and Love.

I want all our days to feel as miraculous as they truly are.

May it be so.