

“The Abuse of God: And What We Can Do About It”

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Do you remember the first time you heard about a God? Was it a surprise? Did you feel like it could not possibly be true? Take a moment and try to remember what it felt like to realize that there truly was a supreme being. And now, also think about all the attributes, characteristics, and traits that God has been given. Could it possibly be? If you have ever questioned the existence of God, at least the one that was given to you, when do you believe that that happened and why? And how has your life changed because of that questioning? Believe it or not, the description of God has changed much over the centuries. Well, maybe God has actually changed too, who knows.

Who is your God today? What is your supreme being looking like these days? I bet there have been changes in your idea of God as you have grown and changed. The way God has been perceived has not stayed the same in the writings of the three monotheistic religions either. As humanity has grown in its care and concern for one another, so God's actual nature has also changed, or at least the way God was written about. So the question is begged, does God reflect humanity's growth, or does God cause the growth of humanness and love in humanity to change? Is that a matter of history or opinion?

The concept of faith has also changed, in time, from establishing a right relationship with the spirits that are contained in everything, into wanting to control the spirits outside of humanity through rituals done by religious leaders. Religion became a ploy, a plot, a plan to supply humanity with a means of influencing the universe to the making sure of spiritual contact and material possession of it.

To begin to name the gods, the fairies, the angels, the devils, was a way of making them favorable from the start, of gaining influence over them, by defining them. By giving this awesome power a name, people would not only learn about them but unfortunately try to control them and their believed awesome power.

If the prayers said by the religious leaders worked, where and for whom the prayer was said was thought to be safe, then the prayer became a ritual. Soon the leaders chided those who did not do the prayer correctly. So, it was figured, there was a right way and a wrong way to pray, to handle the gods. Ritual continued, done in the “correct way,” to reassure the leaders and the people that the gods only responded to them, the anointed ones, and rituals were only to be done in one, specific, correct way. The ritual done correctly, then would relieve the soul of humanity of doubt and the crushing anxiety and dread that life often brings. This is the history of the Eucharist and the Mass. From there it is an easy leap to see the priests of the gods would need training and payment, and temples. The movement from the sweet, often predictable, spirit-filled gods of the kitchen to the powerful monotheistic gods of the salvation was, I believe an attempt by the Jews, the Muslims, and the Christians to escape from the powerlessness that seems to be our fate as humans. And bit by bit, the rituals came to rule all aspects of life of the gods and their relationship to humans. Something beautiful was lost as religion grew and became solidified, what was lost was the ability of a person to establish their own relationship with their idea of the

divine. And it wasn't until 1984 and the establishment of our UU Principles that that ability to search for truth and meaning in your life was put back into the hands of individuals.

The history of religion is a progression of ever-narrowing "isms:" animism to polytheism to monotheism. Monotheism had its beginnings in the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE, as the captured Israelites became familiar with a notion called henotheism, which is the worship of one God without denying the existence of other gods. But henotheism for the Jews was soon changed with Moses' experience with Yahweh in the burning bush in the desert. It was said that this God in the bush was the originator of the monotheistic idea when he revealed; "I, the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children of them that hate me." It was the Israelites under Moses who first embraced the concept of a pure monotheism. Mohammed followed a thousand years later, giving monotheism a truly enthusiastic new life, in the beginnings of Islam.

The God of the Hebrew Bible starts out quite warlike and savage in his disregard for anyone but the chosen Hebrews. In the early Hebrew Bible books, God's armies are allowed to pillage and rape and kill and take captives of all the people they conquer. But God's consciousness seems to grow as the prophets of Israel come onto the scene, around the 500's before the common era, and it is that the God of Israel has now distinguished himself, from all the other deities worshipped by the other nations surrounding Israel. But he also begins to call for a change, to call for reforms of the Israelite people. He changes his commands, as the armies are no longer allowed to kill and maim and rape and pillage. In fact they are now to care for the widow, the orphan and the poor. The very fundamental story of the Exodus now was expanded to first God would take care of his people, the chosen people, to now it was stressed that God was on the side of the weak and the oppressed.

The covenant God had made with Abraham that said, "I will be your God and you will be my people" was now not meant to be a privilege, but rather a responsibility. Now Yahweh does not want sacrifices any longer, he wants love. No longer distant and remote, he now has needs, and one of those needs is that - his people love him. It is believed that this change in God from Testament to Testament was of great influence on Mohammad as he heard the words of the Koran from St. Gabriel.

The ancient Hebrew law of retaliation from Exodus 21:23-25 (*if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*) was an advance over the tribal practices which assumed that a single offense against a member of the tribe called for wholesale destruction of the offending tribe.

But Jesus rejects the whole notion of retaliation and demands instead a response to a misdeed that is the reverse of what is expected. It is not the recommendation of nonresistance; it is rather the response of positive good in the face of evil.

1. When one is insulted, they are to offer the other cheek as an act of love. This act, because it is not the normal human reaction is intended to challenge the aggressor by grace and love, rather than by retaliation.
2. When one is asked for their essential clothing, their coat, the long garment reaching to the ankles that served as a basic covering for the body, they should offer as well their outer cloak, a heavy, more expensive garment which served for protection against sun, cold or rain as well as

bedding for the night. In the first century there was a Jewish law protecting those who had to pawn their clothing: A cloak had to be returned at night so they would not have to sleep unprotected from the cold. It was also the attitude of Jews in Jesus' day that nakedness was to be held against the one who caused it, not the victim of the nakedness. In this context, what is the effect of Jesus' saying "let him have your cloak as well?" These are acts of grace, which contradict the ordinary human reaction to harsh treatment, and the intention is to overcome the wrongdoer by love instead of by a greater show of coercive force.

Roman law allowed soldiers occupying colonial territory such as Palestine to force local people to carry a soldier's pack for up to one mile, this same law punished a soldier who forced a subject to bear the burden farther than one mile. How does this context affect your response to Jesus' teaching, "go with him two miles?"

The Prophets of the Hebrew Bible were fierce people. All the Prophets had a specific call from God. All the Prophets had some doom and gloom in their messages, but they are also remembered because of the good tidings of liberty to the captives, as they reminded the Jews that all slaves were to be freed after 6 years. The Prophets were the consciences of the people. They were one of the first in the Bible who talked about the responsibility to care for people who were poor, the widow and the orphans. They spoke against slavery and bondage and taking advantage of people. They helped people find a new way to deal with those who were sick and talked continually how God's people should care for one another. Being followers of this Yahweh meant that now you were to give up an eye for an eye and move to a new level of care for everyone. They offered hope when the nation was captured. They were constant reminders that as God has said he will care for his people, then we are to be like God here on earth and care for one another. How different from the earlier proclamations of any nation that is conquered, the spoilers can pillage, plunder, kill and take captive any peoples they so desire. As Israel moved from the forms of government that were pretty crude like the Judges, to the Kings, so to God became less crude and more willing to care for everyone, poor, maimed and as the book of Ruth showed the Jews, even non Jews.

The God the New Testament has needs. Angered beyond reason with people's sins, he now again wants sacrifice and restitution as he did so long ago with Abraham and Isaac. So a Messiah, a sacrificial lamb needs to be born to carry the sins of the generation before and those to come. Only his death, the death of God's son will fill the bill. This is all implied in the Gospels, but never explained very well. What God the Father actually receives by Jesus' death we are never told. But we are told that now that it has been done, God could never ask for that kind of sacrifice from any human again.

If polytheism is the worship of many gods, and henotheism is the worship of one god without denying the existence of others, and pantheism is the worship of the earth as a god, and the gods of salvation demand a monotheism, what are we as UUs, who have so many varying beliefs in god, to believe? Look what religion, God, spirit has been through in this world; animism, Goddess worship, the rise of monotheism, the Dark Ages, the Inquisition, the Crusades, fundamentalism, the Enlightenment, New Age, and the rise of popularity of Eastern religions. And what in all that time has been the underlining, underpinning principle – a relationship with a spirit that is felt but not seen. A spirit that seems above us but yet within us. A spirit that is

indefinable and yet of some substance because so many people have searched their whole lives for it, given their lives easily for it, and forced others to recognize it, whether they wanted to or not. What a powerful invisible energy this God-ness has been in our world. And yet, there is not a person in the world who has seen this spirit, or would recognize it if it came up and shook hands with them. And yet, through all these definitions and revelations and disclosures, we are still and blessedly, as UUs, urged to discover who and what this spirit is for ourselves. Now that is good news indeed.

I often feel sorry for God, at least the God that is forced on people. And the forcing comes from various places. Some people believe God is so outside humanity it is a sin to even try to talk about the idea. Some believe that God is nothing more than a vending machine, put in your money, press the right button and receive whatever it is you want. Always the games, the games played around this power. "Oh God," the prayer begins, "save me, save whoever, and I will stop smoking, drinking, I will go to church, I will do whatever you ask, just now, just for this one moment, do what I ask." God as vending machine. Yuck! Maybe the warning is: don't bargain with your sense of the holy.

Then there is God as punisher, "You just wait until your Father gets home!" The God that is so willing to send us to hell, although there is no scriptural recording of that fact, hence the Universalists of our past felt justified in challenging this kind of God saying rather that all are saved, universally. Or the God of the insignificant, as the one who cares about a run in our pantyhose, or the stock market, or if the rice burned or what you have done and why. Once I heard sin described as the act of missing the mark, now you fill in the blank, and I think there are, using this definition, many sins done to this idea of God. And I believe equally as appalling is many UU's lack of trying to work with this entity at all.

I am the kind of person who uses a butter knife to fix just about anything. Why go look for a screwdriver when the butter knife is right there where you need it? Because, I have learned, that the correct tool is everything, the difference between really getting the job done well and doing something only half way. There is a parallel here in our search for a deeper life, the holy, the sacred in life. I believe that most people in the world feel there are either none, or inadequate tools available to complete this kind of search. So, in desperation, frustration, dissatisfaction, and general annoyance, people have slipped into a complacent, unworried, already created for them, kind of God. As UUs we have been given the permission, the command if you will, to find our own truth and meaning in life. And that is a gift and a terrifying prospect for people who are so willing to believe what has been revealed without doing the hard work of figuring out what it is they truly believe. And the other difficult piece of this search is that you can't use a butter knife to get the job done. You need a whole new set of tools than you have even used before. And because of this feeling of a lack of tools, many give up the quest and take what has been revealed whether it fits their sensibilities, their reason or not. The sacred, the holy, your deeper self, God in fact, do not respond to the same tools you could use in other parts of your life and therein lies the rub for most people. You need new tools. And you won't find them in any place our world has told you you will find them, because they are not tools, muscles or pathways we are used to. Silence is a tool, meditation, reading, studying, listening, paying attention, noticing, spending time in community, being aware of your past, working with it and letting it go, appreciating, mulling, forgiving, thoughtful acts of love and kindness and compassion are some of the tools you need to discover this presence of utter love in your life. And because it is a

road less traveled by most in our western society, we are often clueless on how to do the walking, and often, then we just don't do it.

But try as you may, you will find you cannot run from a need for a definition, clarity and sharpness when dealing with the idea of the holy. The need is raw, hungry, scared, and often at odds with the ways of the world. How you have defined your sense of the holy, the sacred, the powerful, the fearful, the authority, may just mean the difference in your life between serenity or serious mental illness, the difference between happiness and hallucinations, wholeness and exaggerated fears, insecurity or blessed peace. Hold out your hands, palms up facing you. It's all there, all the power you will ever need to make the decisions of the revelation of the holy, or God-ness. Now put those palms on your heart, and feel it beating. There lies the divine, the holy, the mysterium tremendum, the sacred, the creator, the destroyer, the healer and the visionary. There, in the beat, beat, beat, lies all you need to find the answers you have so desperately been looking for. Do it, create it, shape it, hold it, love it and most of all define it. Do it, don't delay. This may sound like a blasphemous statement, but I mean it in all of its permutations, if you desire a relationship with the holy, the sacred, God, you must begin to act like holiness, sacredness, Godness. And that is a truth I have come to after years of trying to decide what I believe about God.

Maybe the God the Testaments is not your idea of God, that's ok, but you can't just throw God out of your life without there being a vacuum that needs to be filled with something. And that something can of course be your own identity, but we must do the work of figuring that out. Because there are forces in the Universe that we cannot see, hear or touch, but that do have power, call it energy if you want, but some recognition of that force needs to be done in order for us to be whole, healthy and wise. Now, of course, it is your prerogative whether you believe me or not.