

The G-Word: Does Anyone Know What It Means?

Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern
[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)
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Reading

*"God II" from **Heretics' Faith** by Fredric John Muir*

God is a word that we've come up with to describe what no other single word can. Just in that alone, the word is insufficient. The ancient Hebrews recognized this right off, and so they made their word for God unutterable: it was sacrilegious to say that word. So then they came up with a word that meant the word no one could say!

It's because of this kind of thinking that I've called myself everything from atheist to agnostic to pagan -- all done, in part, as a reaction to the misuse, overuse, and perversion of the word God. The most profound abuse has been accomplished by orthodox Western religions that have endowed their God with humanlike qualities as well as raising God above nature. My God is neither anthropomorphic nor supernatural: to me it is absurd, meaningless, destructive, and oppressive to conceptualize a higher power as having attributes like humanity has in addition to being above and outside what we know, see, and feel.

I often use the word God merely because it's from the common pool of representations, what is called language -- but I don't like it because of all the connotations, the "baggage," that comes with it. My higher power or God is not of or in this world, it is the world. As such, it works for me; it makes sense to me socially, politically, and spiritually when I confess to a God that is the world, for God and the Cosmos are one -- they are synonymous. God is everything I know and probably don't know; it is the process that keeps life as I know it working; it is the process that keeps my life working. The purpose of the Cosmos -- of God -- is simply to continue itself, not to designate one piece better or worse, not to reward and so support and nurture certain elements more than others. Its purpose is just to continue -- with whatever it takes, however it might be done -- to maintain the flow of balance in order to sustain life, its life, the ongoing-ness of the Cosmos.

Sermon

I recently received an e-mail I wanted to share with you. It begins:

GOD'S TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

God would like to thank you for your belief and patronage. In order to better serve your needs, He asks that you take a few moments to answer the following questions. Please keep in mind that your responses will be kept completely confidential, and that you need not disclose your name or address unless you prefer a direct response to comments or suggestions.

1. How did you find out about God?

- Newspaper
- Bible
- Torah
- Book of Mormon
- Koran
- Other book
- Television
- Divine inspiration
- Word of mouth
- Dead Sea Scrolls
- My mother told me
- Near-death experience
- National Public Radio
- Tabloid
- Burning shrubbery
- Who?
- Other (specify): _____

2. Which model God did you acquire?

- Yahweh
- Jehovah
- Allah
- Just plain God
- Krishna
- Father, Son & Holy Ghost (Trinity Pak)
- Zeus & entourage (Olympus Pak)
- Odin & entourage (Valhalla Pak)
- Gaia/Mother Earth/Mother Nature
- None of the above; I was taken in by a false god

3. Did your God come to you undamaged, with all parts in good working order and with no obvious breakage or missing attributes?

- Yes No

**If not, please describe the problems you initially encountered here.
Please indicate all that apply:**

- Not eternal
- Not omniscient

- ___ Not omnipotent
- ___ Finite in space/Does not occupy or inhabit the entire universe
- ___ Permits sex outside of marriage
- ___ Prohibits sex outside of marriage
- ___ Makes mistakes (e.g., Geraldo Rivera)
- ___ When beseeched, doesn't stay beseeched
- ___ Requires burnt offerings
- ___ Plays dice with the universe

To think that we could have input into God's way of working in the world the way we can influence customer service at Sears, the product line at GM! It's the absurd premise of this questionnaire. And yet all religions *do* respond, to greater or lesser degrees, to what their believers come to believe. Interpretations change, holy scriptures are flexible, revelation -- as we say here -- is ongoing. All of which makes "God" mighty hard to pin down.

Former president of the UUA John Buehrens says that people frequently tell him, when he says he is a minister, that they don't believe in a God. To these street-corner and airline-neighbor confessions, he, a theist himself, often responds: "Tell me about the God you don't believe in. Chances are I don't believe in that God either." Indeed, just as there is no patent on what it means to be Christian, there is no trademark on the word God, no set ingredients that make it a God or don't. And our conceptions of the God we do or do not believe in are as different as we ourselves are.

Well, there are some folks among us who take on labels that do give us a clue as to what they mean when they use the word. And among the folks who do so are some who live and flourish within this community's embrace.

The church's search packet included the results of a survey that asked folks what religious orientations they had. Two hundred fifty people responded to the survey. What is most telling is that when you added up all the votes in each category, as I did, you get a total of 762 responses. That means each person checked an average of three boxes. That is very typical UU. We hate to be boxed in. But, to be fair, it also says something about how hard it is for one label to describe a person's theology in all its fullness.

Well, among the categories offered in this survey were Theists (who got 24 votes), Naturalistic Theists (who got 86 votes) and Earth-centered Spirituality folks (who got 79 votes). Eclectic got 78, but really should have gotten 250 votes, given the fact that 250 people voted 762 times -- but anyway à

The labels themselves aren't necessarily self-explanatory. What exactly is a Natural Theist? I can guess, but it isn't in my Columbia Encyclopedia. And I get generally what is meant by Earth-centered spirituality, but I wouldn't place any great wagers on it. However, these labels offer us clues, and others, like the theists, have a clear and defined history of meaning.

As I noted, we have 24 self-proclaimed **theists**. Historically this term has been used to describe folks who believe in a personal God, one who is both immanent (that is, in and of the world) and who is beyond it, and with whom direct and one-to-one relationships are possible. They can be Christian theists and Jewish theists or theists who don't belong to any larger body. It is, however, a more traditional understanding of the category that God occupies -- of God's general place in the universe -- even if the specifics of that God are innovative and different.

Rosemary Bray McNatt, minister of the 4th Universalist Church in New York City, wrote a UUA pamphlet called "Faith of a Theist." In it, she talks about how she left a belief in God when she came not to believe in the God taught her in her Catholic upbringing, but how, finding herself in UU churches, she found her theism again. She writes:

The answer came slowly. Bit by bit, I learned to acknowledge grace, came to believe the irrational idea that, amid everything, there was a knowing, loving presence that abides in all things, even in me. I knew that I could not explain what was gradually becoming clear to me. I only knew the truth of the mystic Julian of Norwich's proclamation that "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

At the same time I was comforted by this notion, I remained suspicious of it. How could all be well when I myself had spent a childhood in which all was definitely not well? How could it all be well as long as people cried out for justice and bread? How could it be well when millions lived out their lives without one moment of ease or pleasure while others knew nothing else? I had no answers to the questions -- only the continuing sense that there is so much more to our lives here than the horrors we inflict on one another and the blessings we bestow too rarely.

And then, one day, God spoke. On retreat at a women's conference in Wisconsin, I joined with other participants in a sacred spiral dance led by a noted member of the women's spirituality movement. Asked as part of the dance to speak to the divine and listen for an answer, I joined in, impatient, skeptical, and freezing cold. As I made a perfunctory list of my concerns, I could suddenly feel a Presence in me. It was a Presence that made itself felt in every cell of my body, and it was followed by a Voice, neither male nor female, and utterly unlike anything I had ever felt. The Voice made itself heard in my body, and it told me clearly, lovingly, "Don't worry, my child, don't worry." When I spoke to the Voice about the hopes and dreams of my life, the secret desires I carried with me everywhere, it promised me "all these things and more." And then the Voice and Presence left me, and left me changed forever.

For Rosemary Bray McNatt, what she found was a relationship with God, a very personal relationship with God, but not the same God she had left. And she goes on to say that it was her Unitarian Universalism that made that finding possible. "Because of this faith," she writes, "I can be confident that my search for the Divine is structured, not by static institutions or individuals, but by the God who continues to call me and whom I continue to question. Because of this powerful freedom to believe -- and to doubt -- I live in trust, believing all manner of things will be well."

It is interesting to note something here. We tend to hear so often about people whose *loss* of a belief in God brings them to our communities. It is important to remember that some people may find a belief in God in our midst, even a traditional, theistic understanding of God, such as the personal relationship with a God that Rosemary speaks of finding while among UUs. This is part of what we make possible also for people who come to us.

What about these Naturalistic Theists among us? What does their God look like? Well, it strikes me that these folks are those who, in other eras, might have been called **deists**. This was a very popular movement in the 17th and 18th centuries and is alive and well now too. This is attested to by the fact that I found a very active Web site out there called Deist.com.

Deists held that the course of nature, the workings and the majesty of the universe were enough to prove the existence of God. There was no need to appeal to revealed religion for the deist. Evidence of God and revelation of God's power and attributes were all over and apparent. The argument for God was in nature. Thomas Jefferson articulated well their position when he confessed:

I hold (without appeal to revelation) that when we take a view of the universe, in its parts, general or particular, it is impossible for the human mind not to perceive and feel a conviction of design, consummate skill, and indefinite power in every atom of its composition. The movements of the heavenly bodies, so exactly held in their course by the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces; the structure of the Earth itself, with its distribution of lands, waters and atmosphere; animal and vegetable bodies, examined in all their minutest particles; insects, mere atoms of life, yet as perfectly organized as man or mammoth; the mineral substances, their generation and uses, it is impossible, I say, for the human mind not to believe, that there is in all this, design, cause and effect, up to an ultimate cause, a Fabricator of all things from matter and motion, their Preserver and Regulator, while permitted to exist in their present forms, and their regeneration into new and other forms. We see, too, evident proofs of the necessity of a superintending power, to maintain the universe in its course and order.

So the deists of previous centuries called themselves "freethinkers." They called themselves such because they didn't believe the supernaturalism of most established faiths. They didn't believe in relying on the revealed religion of other faith traditions. They didn't think you needed priests or rabbis to tell you about this God or what it called you to, but that reason and meditation, even communion with nature, would reveal to each what needed to be known

The deists today, like those of old, don't generally believe in a God that is personal and relational. This God is the God who set the universe in motion and stood back to watch it. It is a God beyond the world, not in it, but *evidence of which* has been left behind.

Albert Einstein offered a deistic description of God when he said, "My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional

conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God."

In comparison to the deists, whose distant God leaves breadcrumbs in the world to show that he has been here and gone, there are the **pantheists**. Their God, in contrast, is everywhere present. The pantheists among us would be, I imagine, some of those who called themselves the Earth-centered Spirituality folks. They are among the 79 of us who see the holy present in the created natural world.

"God is all and all is God" is a pantheist's cry. Pantheists are those who for centuries have proclaimed that God *is* the universe, all of it, and that nothing is separate and distinct from it. The pantheist's God is immanent and only immanent. On the Pantheism.net Web site they proclaim, "Pantheism holds that the cosmos taken or conceived of as a whole, is synonymous with the theological principle of God. The cosmos is divine, and the earth is sacred."

John Burroughs, a naturalist and fan of Whitman and Thoreau, friend of John Muir, wrote in 1920 (in *Accepting the Universe*):

How much is in a name! When we call the power back of all *God*, it smells of creeds and systems, of superstition, intolerance, persecution; but when we call it *Nature*, it smells of spring and summer, of green fields and blooming groves, of birds and flowers and sky and stars à

The word *God* has so long stood for the conception of a being who sits apart from Nature, who shapes and rules it as its maker and governor à This offends my sense of the oneness of creation. It seems to me that there is no other adequate solution of the total problem of life and Nature than what is called *pantheism*, which identified mind and matter, finite and Infinite, and sees in all these diverse manifestations one absolute being. As Emerson truly says, pantheism does not belittle God, it magnifies him. God becomes the one and ultimate fact that fills the universe and from which we can no more be estranged than we can be estranged from gravitation.

This is the faith of a pantheist, identified with all creation, a faith in a creative force that is purely immanent. If it is understood as a "God" (which it need not be), theirs is a God close at hand that breathes through the world and breathes *with* the world. It is not a God that feels emotion or loves its creation the way the theists' personal God does. Nor, however, is it the distant, removed force that the deists pray to in vain. This God, if not personal, is at least close enough to touch, moving even through us.

To be fair, there is one other of these big theological words that bears mentioning today. It is the **panentheists**, and they are very popular among UU circles these days. These are the close cousins of pantheists. They believe that God is everything in the universe à *and more*. The panentheists believe in a God who is both immanent and transcendent, but who is most closely aligned with nature. The world, and humans especially, become the limbs, the hands and feet and body of a God who also is beyond this world, and are called

to do God's work when they can. Humans become co-creators of something that they can still pray to because it is not only within but beyond this world also.

Those are a few of the categories of believers that some of our members find themselves in relationship with. And in each of these groupings, the word "God" can be used, and in each it will mean something very different. Meanwhile, we haven't even discussed the Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Christians for whom the word God has even other connotations and for whom it would mean something different also.

Forrester Church, senior minister of All Souls Church in New York City, says, "God is not God's name, but our name for that which is greater than each of us and yet present within each." It is a metaphor for a feeling, the best guess at the origins of an experience, a hope, an instinct, a desire. Depending on who we are, it means something wholly different and yet equally powerful and real.

So why use the word at all, you may be wondering. If it is so hard to nail down, and so fraught with the potential for imprecision and misunderstanding, why not agree to dispense with the word once and for all? I know that some of you, especially those for whom the word means nothing but myth and fantasy, would have us do away with it. But the survey of the congregation shows that the word means something to some of us here. And I for one see no reason to let ours become the community of the least common denominator -- purging our language and our worship of anything that doesn't mean something to everyone, or the same thing to all people. We can and we will find a way to honor all the language that is significant to us all -- to honor as wide a spectrum of belief as possible -- and be more, not less, for having done so.

Moreover, the fact is, we use language all the time that we cannot define. We talk of *beauty* and of *goodness*, of *truth* and of *love*, and there must be a thousand different definitions of these words in this room alone. Yet we use them. And we do so because they point to an ideal toward which we all stretch, of which we each have momentary glimpses and which we yearn to incorporate more fully into our lives, our world. So it is, for some of us, with the word God. Porous as it is, it serves a purpose. It gives a name to the nameless.

May we each and together serve what is precious and holy in the world, being true to what has ultimacy for each of us and that gives our lives meaning -- no matter what we call it. And may religious language flourish among us, like an embarrassment of riches, so that each may take what she must to nourish herself on the religious journey, and none walk away from this banquet famished. So may it be. Amen.