

WHO OR WHAT IS IN CHARGE? THE GOD QUESTION

by Reverend Kit Ketcham, April 9, 2006

OPENING WORDS

SYMPOSIUM by Joe Rush, member of Boulder UU Fellowship, 1935

“God,” said the theologian,
“Is a triune entity
Of Holy Spirit, Father, Son,
Yet One for all eternity.”

A workman dropped his pick, and spat,
As he frowned and scratched his head.
“Why, God”--he labored with the thought--
“God saves our souls when we are dead.”

“God is a myth!” the atheist spoke
With an air of studied scorn.
“Chance rules; and man, stern nature’s joke,
Once dead, might never have been born.”

A tired old lady, bent and gray,
Closed the Book and met my eyes:
“For years I’ve trusted Him; one day
He’ll call me home beyond the skies.”

“God loves me,” smiled a little girl,
Pausing breathlessly at play.
Her father groaned, “Oh Godless world!”
The day his child was laid away.

“The Lord of Hosts is on our side!”--
And they urged men on...to die:
Somewhere beyond the battle tide
“Gott mit uns!” echoed back the cry.

O Power that wields insensate sod
To a dim celestial plan,
Is man the image of his God,
Or God a counterpart of man?

STORY FOR ALL AGES: “Children’s Letters to God”

Dear God, in Sunday School they told us what You do. Who does it when you are on vacation? Jane

Dear God, I read the Bible. What does “begat” mean? Nobody will tell me.

Love, Allison

Dear God, If you watch me in church Sunday, I'll show You my new shoes. Mickey

Dear God, Are you really invisible or is that a trick? Lucy

Dear God, Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident? Norma

Dear God, Please send me a pony. I never asked for anything before. You can look it up.
Bruce

Dear God, Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't You just keep the ones You have now? Jane

Dear God, Who draws the lines around countries? Nan

Dear God, I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church. Is that okay? Neil

Dear God, What does it mean You are a jealous God? I thought you had everything. Jane

Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. Joyce

Dear God, I think about You sometimes even when I'm not praying. Elliot

Dear God, My brother told me about being born, but it doesn't sound right. They're just kidding, aren't they? Marsha

Dear God, We read Thomas Edison made light. But in Sunday School they said You did it. So I bet he stoled Your idea. Donna

Dear God, I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset You made on Tuesday. That was cool. Eugene

READING: "New Microsoft Product Bulletin" (from the Internet)

Microsoft Corporation today announced its intent to purchase, copyright, and upgrade God Himself. The new product would be named, predictably enough, "Microsoft God", and would be available to consumers sometime in late 2006. "Too many people feel separated from God in today's world," said Dave McCavaugh, director of Microsoft's new Religions division. "Microsoft God will make our Lord more accessible, and will add an easy, intuitive user interface to him, making him not only easier to find, but easier to communicate with."

The new Microsoft Religions line will be expanded to include a multitude of add-on products to Microsoft God, including:

Microsoft Missionary: This conversion software will import all worshiper accounts and prayer files over from previous versions of God, or from competing products like Buddha or Allah.

Microsoft God for the World Wide Web: This product links Microsoft God with Microsoft Internet Information Server using the proprietary Omnipotent MaxiModem, making our Lord accessible from the World Wide Web using a standard Web browser interface. It also introduces several new Web technologies, including Dynamic Divine Salvation and Active Prayer Pages. Donations for the poor can be transferred via the Secure Alms Server.

Microsoft Prayer: Using a Windows-based WYSIWYG interface, this product will allow worshipers to construct effective prayers in a minimum of time. Prayer Templates will make everyday prayers, like saying grace and children's bedtime prayers, a snap. The Guardian Angel Secure Prayer Channel and Instant Thought Transfer technologies allow guaranteed,

instantaneous deliver of the prayers to Microsoft God servers, and Prayer Wizards enable the user to construct new types of prayers with a minimum theological learning curve.

Microsoft Savior: This shareware product will allow worshipers to transfer their sins to the password protected Secure Confessional Database, free for a trial period of forty days and forty nights.

Thereafter, for unlimited eternal usage and free Born Again upgrades, sinners are required to register and remit monthly tithes and offerings. Major credit cards accepted. Future transgressions will then be atone and a clear line of secure communications to the Microsoft God Salvation Server will be provided.

Additional products to be available by spring of 2008:

Gabriel's Trumpet sound card; Revelation and Rapture, version 666, decryption software; Joyous Scepter joystick; Visions 7-D Graphics card; Gideon book "God for Dummies"; Celestial Sounds Thunderbolt 20 gigawatt speaker system; SimParadise and SimCreation software; AfterDark Flying Cherubs screensaver.

For more information, visit his web site at: <http://www.pearlygates.org/god.html> or email himat:almighty1@heaven.net.

HOMILITO: "Struggling with the God Concept".

Wouldn't it be wonderful if relating to the idea of God were as easy as buying a new software product for our computers? Certainly it would be less of a hassle than figuring out whether or not Prayer fits our own belief systems or whether Salvation makes any sense in the post-modern paradigm or whether Science is our Savior or our Satan. Think of the relevance of the new Scripture: Microsoft God for Dummies.

We laugh at the very notion that Ultimate Reality can be reduced to a computer program and yet, in this age of quick-as-a-wink transmission and instantaneous feedback, we wish it were so easy. We've gotten spoiled by the ease with which we can communicate with other continents, with satellites on missions to outer space, with the guy on the cellphone in the next car. But the idea of God remains elusive and frustrating.

Our service today is an offbeat look at relationships between the human and the Divine-- whatever you may conceive that to be. One of our UU struggles is with the concept of God. As a pluralistic faith, we are accustomed to the idea that not everyone believes in God. Buddhism, for example, and other nonWestern faith traditions have looked to ancestors and tradition for their wisdom. Nontheists in Western countries have long felt that there is little scientific evidence for the idea of God and tend to think of God as a human invention.

Whatever your thinking may be about the idea of God, we hope that you will find food for thought in this service as we explore some of the many ways human beings have thought about God, Goddess, the Spirit of Life, the Divine Source, the Mother and Father of us all, you supply your own metaphor or expression!

Anselm, an 11th century Christian theologian, applied scholarly logic to theological controversy and speculation. He wrote a statement in which he attempted to prove the existence of God by means of logical deduction. He wrote:

“This proposition is indeed so true that its negation is inconceivable. For it is quite conceivable that there is something whose non-existence is inconceivable, and this must be greater than that whose non-existence is conceivable. Wherefore, if that thing than which no greater thing is conceivable can be conceived as non-existent; then, that very thing than which a greater is inconceivable is not that than which a greater is inconceivable; which is a contradiction. “So true is it that there exists something than which a greater is inconceivable, that its non-existence is inconceivable; and this thing art Thou, O Lord our God.”

Tough going, isn't it? When I first read this, in my Church History class a few years ago, I burst out laughing. It seemed like a joke. However, nobody else in that Iliff classroom seemed to find it as funny as I did, so I had to do some thinking about it. And I realized that proving the existence of God has been a problem that human beings have struggled with since time immemorial.

As for me, I prefer a poetic attempt. Let me read a poem which better captures the mystery that I think human beings have been struggling with. The name of the poem is “Epiphany” and it is by Pem Kremer.

“Lynn Schmidt says
She saw you once as prairie grass, Nebraska prairie grass.
She climbed out of her car on a hot highway,
Leaned her butt on the nose of her car,
Looked out over one great flowing field,
Stretching beyond her sight until the horizon came.
Vastness, she says,
Responsive to the slightest shift of wind,
Full of infinite change,
All One.
She says when she can't pray,
She calls up Prairie Grass.”

When I think of moments spent on prairie grasslands, on a mountainside, at the ocean, in a midnight sky, a field of sandhill cranes, a desert shelf, an immense river canyon, God is not just a theory to me.

In our efforts to describe the force we may call God or Source of Life or Love, we often get frustrated and irritated. It's not easy to describe something which is invisible yet sort of visible, loving yet dangerous, all powerful yet tragically bumbling, getting a lot of credit for creativity but not really measuring up to some of our own human standards. Despite humankind's apparent complete dependence on nature, or God as some call it, we often wish that this incredible Force would get its act together and behave in a responsible and predictable way. Like we do.

Ken Merrell and Malcolm Ferrier will explain further.

READING: ADAM'S LAMENT by Nicholas Biel, adapted by Lev Ropes

There I was, on the third day, dust, common ordinary dust
Like you see on a country road after a dry spell.
Nothing expected. Me expecting nothing neither.
On the sixth day, HE comes along and blows,
And, "In my image" he says, like he was doing me a favor.
Sometimes I think if he'd waited a million years, then I'd be tired of being dust,
But after two, three days, what can you expect?
I wasn't used to being even dust and he makes me into Man.

He could see right away from the look on my face, that I wasn't so pleased,
So he's gonna butter me up. He puts me in this garden, only I don't butter.
Then he brings me all the animals. I should give them names.
What do I know, names?
"Call it something," he says, "anything you want."
So I make up names--bear, wolf, mouse, lion, snake...It's crazy, but that's
What he wants. Later in the day, I get rummy, and I'm running out of ideas.
Peccary, platypus, emu, gnu.
"I got gnus for you", I think.
Finally I'm naming animals since 5 a.m., I'm tired, I go to bed early.
In the morning, I wake up and there SHE is, sitting by a pool admiring herself.
"Hello, Adam," she says. "I'm your mate, I'm Eve."
"Pleased to meet you," I say, and we shake hands.

Actually, I'm not so pleased. From time immemorial, nothing.
Now, rush, rush, rush; two days ago I'm dust, yesterday all day I'm naming animals,
And today I got a mate already.
Also I don't like the way she looks at herself in the water.. or at me!

Well, you know what happened. I don't have to tell you. There were all those fruit trees;
she took a bite, I took a bite, the snake took a bite, and quick like a flash--
out of the garden. Such a fuss over one lousy apple, not even ripe yet (there wasn't time
since creation.)

Now I'm not complaining. After all, it's his garden. He don't want nobody eating his
apples, that's his business.
What irritated me, is the nerve of the guy. I don't ask him to make me even dust; he could
have left me nothing, like I was before.

Also, I didn't ask for Cain, for Abel...I didn't ask for nothing, but anything goes wrong,
who gets the blame? Sodom, Gomorrah, Babel, Ararat....me or my kids catch it--fire,
flood, pillar of salt.

“Be patient, be a little understanding,” says Eve, “look, he made it, it was his idea, it breaks down, so he’ll fix it.”

But I told him one day, “you’re in too much of a hurry. In six days you make everything there is and you expect it to run smoothly? Something’s always gonna happen. If you’d thought it out more first, made a plan, asked for advice, you wouldn’t have so much trouble all the time.”

But you couldn’t tell him nothing. He knows it all. Like I say, he means well, but he’s a meddler and he’s careless. For example, he coulda made that woman so she wouldn’t bite no apple.

All right, all right, so what’s done is done, but all the same, he should’ve known better, or at least he coulda blown on some other dust.

READING : “Why God Never Got Tenure” (internet)

1. He had only one major publication.
2. It was written in Aramaic, not English.
3. It has no references.
4. The abstract was not published in a reputable journal.
5. There are serious doubts that he wrote the manuscript himself.
6. Though he created the world, what were his significant accomplishments since?
7. His cooperative endeavors have been quite limited.
8. The scientific community could not replicate his results.
9. He unlawfully performed not only animal, but human, testing.
10. He rarely came to class, just told his students to read the textbook.
11. He expelled his first two students for exhibiting an unusual appetite for knowledge.
12. His office hours were infrequent, and usually inaccessible, held on a mountaintop.
13. Although he only established 10 requirements to pass his course, most of his students failed the test.

HOMILITO: “When God Doesn’t Measure Up”

As a species, we’re often disappointed in God. The Divine just doesn’t come through in the ways we think it ought to. We ask hard questions: why would a supposedly loving God send his/her children to burn in hell just for being human? why would God make some people survive an accident and others die horribly? what on earth possessed God to make a platypus? or a black widow spider? if God is Love, why does Love often hurt so much? how come the God of the Hebrew Bible and the God of the New Testament are so different? if God wants us to swallow all this stuff about creation and miracles and dry bones rising again, how come God gave us brains? if God is all-powerful, how come there’s disease and war and famine and human beings who are evil?

We have a lot of questions. And the traditional answers aren’t satisfactory to most of us UUs. So many of us just refuse to speculate. It doesn’t do any good to ask questions that are impossible to answer. Unlike many scientific hypotheses, the theory of God seems impossible to prove.

Others of us LIKE to speculate. We think about the beauty of the earth and the glory of the skies and we are awed by the wonders surrounding us. So God doesn't compute scientifically. What DOES make sense to us are the incredibly intricate laws of nature. They seem to be a clue of some kind to a mystery that is inexplicable.

And, we are forced to admit, human beings haven't exactly been the most responsible bits of creation. We have used our much-vaunted free will to eliminate and despoil much of the bounty which originally existed on this planet. And we're arrogant and self-satisfied. We fight a lot--we fight over God and whose side God is on. We invent the most incredible excuses for torturing our fellow human beings.

We are greedy and grabby and grouchy, often in the name of God. When we look at the history of humankind, it's a little bit embarrassing to think that much of the destruction we have witnessed over the centuries has been attributed to God's alleged promise to prefer one group or religion over all others.

I think God may have been misquoted.

Let's hear now a couple of different points of view from Mary Goolsby and Carol Bingman:

READING: "INVENTING SIN" by George Ella Lyon

God signs to us
We cannot read.
She shouts
We take cover.
She shrugs
And trains leave the tracks.
Our schedules! we moan,
Our loved ones!
God is fed up.
All the oceans she gave us,
All the fields,
All the acres of steep seedful forests,
And we did what?
Invented the Great Chain of Being
And the chain saw
Invented sin.
God sees us now,
Gorging ourselves and
Starving our neighbors,
Starving ourselves and
Storing our grain,
And she says
I've had it!
You cast your trash upon the waters--

It's rolling in,
You stuck your fine, fine finger
Into the mystery of life
to find death.
And you did.
You learned how to end
The world in nothing flat.
Now you come crying to your mommy,
Send us a miracle! Prove that you exist!

Look at your hand, I say,
Listen to your scared heart.
Do you have to haul the tide in,
Sweeten the berries on the vine?

I set you down a miracle among miracles,
You want more? It's your turn.
YOU SHOW ME!

READING: "On the Origin of Dogs and Cats" (internet)

It is reported that the following edition of the Book of Genesis was discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls. If authentic, it would shed light on the question "where do pets come from?"

And Adam said, "Lord, when I was in the garden, you walked with me everyday. Now I do not see you any more. I am lonesome here and it is difficult for me to remember how much you love me."

And God said, "I will create a companion for you that will be with you forever and who will be a reflection of my love for you, so that you will know I love you, even when you cannot see me. Regardless of how selfish and childish and unlovable you may be, this new companion will accept you as you are and will love you as I do, in spite of yourself."

And God created a new animal to be a companion for Adam. And it was a good animal. And God was pleased.

And the new animal was pleased to be with Adam and he wagged his tail. And Adam said, "But Lord, I have already named all the animals in the Kingdom and all the good names are taken and I cannot think of a name for this new animal."

And God said, "Because I have created this new animal to be a reflection of my love for you, his name will be a reflection of my own name, and you will call him DOG."

And Dog lived with Adam and was a companion to him and loved him. And Adam was comforted. And God was pleased. And Dog was content and wagged his tail.

After awhile, it came to pass that Adam's guardian angel came to the Lord and said, "Lord, Adam has become filled with pride. He struts and preens like a peacock and he believes he is worthy of adoration. Dog has indeed taught him that he is loved, but no one has taught him humility."

And the Lord said, "I will create for him a companion who will be with him forever and who will see him as he is. The companion will remind him of his limitations, so he will know that he is not worthy of adoration."

And God created CAT to be a companion to Adam. And Cat would not obey Adam. And when Adam gazed into Cat's eyes, he was reminded that he was not the Supreme Being. And Adam learned humility.

And God was pleased. And Adam was greatly improved. And Cat did not care one way or the other.

HOMILITO: "Why Humans Fail; When Humans Need More"

In the poem Mary read, God is portrayed as an irritated momma, someone who has given all she has to nurture and support her children and finds that they are ungrateful and grasping. She's fed up, she says. This is an image mothers can relate to! And fathers as well. Have our own children been unfailingly grateful and responsible? Hardly, though we love and cherish them. God as disgusted parent is a satisfying concept, even to those of us who resist defining God. We know what it's like to have our best work taken for granted, destroyed, unappreciated. If there were a God, we figure she'd be ticked.

And I wonder what you thought as you listened to Carol? How many of us have dogs? And how many have cats? What do we learn from our fellow inhabitants of the planet? That any creature could treat us with such unflinching and unconditional devotion as a dog is overwhelming to me. My long-gone pal Snicker, a border collie mix who showed up at our house in Athena one day, survived all the disrespect that three kids could dish out and loved and protected us all the days of his life. When he died, he left quite a hole in our lives.

And then there were all the cats who allowed us to feed and house them. Smokey, Matkatamiba, Sam the First, Sam the Second, Kitsa the first, Kitsa the Tooth and now Loosy and Lily. When a cat loves you, it's an honor. Cats don't just dish out their affection to anyone, you have to earn it. Cats will leave home if they don't like the atmosphere. When our son was born, Sam the First moved across the street until Mike was old enough to learn some manners.

Kitsa the First, on the other hand, took a motherly interest in Mike and when he had some baby illness, she'd curl up next to him in the crib where he could clutch her fur and be comforted.

A dog's love is unconditional; a cat's love is an gift. And both are a privilege, as we humans learn to care for the gifts of the Creator.

But human beings may cherish the idea of God for one main reason, so that we may feel that we are not utterly alone in the universe. Despite all our efforts to provide for ourselves a nurturing

and loving life within a community like this, we're all aware that there may come a time in our lives when we are utterly alone, when no one hears us when we call, when no one comes to see if we're okay, when, as the old hymn goes, "other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, O abide with me."

Whether we believe in a God of any kind or whether we are uninterested in the very concept, we are all subject to human loneliness. And in that existential night, we may wonder. Is there Someone? Is there Something beyond humanity? Something or Someone I may never understand but which I wish for, to bring me comfort when I am stricken with fear, to hold my hand when I am dying, to be with me when I am all alone. God works under these circumstances, at least for many of us. There's no explaining it, except in terms of human need.

Thomas Dorsey wrote a wonderful old gospel song 50 years ago when his wife died, a song which has passed from being religious to being a piece of Americana. Its language is too literal for most of us, but it doesn't take much imagination to think of "Precious Lord" as whatever that mysterious Force might be that we want to comfort us in that darkest night, the companion when all others are gone, the antidote to loneliness. Perhaps that is the whole point to the idea of God.

Let's sing that old hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand", #199

CLOSING WORDS: "What do I believe about God?" by Rev. Kit Ketcham

What do I believe about God?

I am an atheist, if you ask me about the old white guy in the sky. I am a believer, if you ask me about nature or spirit or love. I am an agnostic, if you ask for proofs of God. I am a believer, if you ask for my experience of God.

To me, God is all--nature, spirit, love, cosmos, creation. God is in all--in me, in you, in my belongings, in my animals and the garden I tend, in all beings, animate and inanimate. God is in my relationships--with myself, with other beings, with the universe. God is beyond all--infinite, endless, limitless.

How can I know God? How can I not know God? God is all around me, God is within me, God is beyond me. God is in all my experience, yet beyond my experience.

God is mystery, yet I know God when I tend my garden, when I care for my pets, when I nurture my relationships.

God is invisible, yet I view God in the starry sky, in a mountain meadow, in a mighty storm.

God is infinite, yet I experience God in the limitless ocean, in an endless prairie of grass, in the wind which cools the hot day.

God is not human, yet I pray for God's guidance; God is impersonal, yet I seek God's blessing; God is detached, yet I feel God's presence. God is genderless, yet I sense God's understanding of my womanhood. God is changeless, yet I am aware of the continuous growth of creation. What do you believe about God?

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that whatever we think about God, we are all brothers and sisters under the sky. May we look for the divine in each other and may we treat each other with the gentle care that the sacred deserves.

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.