

THE NINETY NINE NAMES OF GOD
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Feb. 22, 2004

When I was a little girl, my family lived in South East Portland, Oregon. There were lots of children on our block, but my particular favorite was a little boy about my age whose name was Milton. In those days, mothers didn't worry too much about their children visiting other families on the block, so occasionally I was allowed to walk down the sidewalk past two or three houses to visit Milton at his house.

One day I came home mumbling something under my breath, a gleam of satisfaction in my eye. (I must have been about four years old at the time.) My mother's sharp ear caught something unexpected and she asked me to speak up.

"God damn it," I said. "God damn it, God damn it, God damn it!"

My mother, a good Baptist preacher's wife, looked at her cherubic darling in horror. Blonde dutch boy haircut, blue eyes, innocent face: "God damn it, God damn it, God damn it!"

"Sweetheart," said my mother, "where did you learn that? Do you know what that means?"

"Milton says it," I answered. "And I like to say it. God damn it. God damn it. God damn it!"

Gulping, my mother pushed on. "Honey, you are telling God to send someone to hell. Is that what you really want to do?"

I apparently was unimpressed; my rebel ways were clearly already beginning to be established. It felt powerful to be able to tell God what to do, especially when God apparently wanted to tell me what to do a lot of the time.

But my mother's good heart and gentle ways eventually prevailed, and I learned to say "God bless it, God bless it, God bless it." Not nearly as satisfyingly rebellious, but more socially acceptable, especially at Calvary Baptist Church, where my father was the minister.

However, the idea that God was important was imprinted on me forever. And the concept of God, though it has changed hugely for me over the years, continues to be something I think about a lot. The idea of God is a compelling playing field for Unitarian Universalists, as well, whose ranks include many who are skeptical about the likelihood of a Supreme Being.

I have done quite a bit of reading over the years about the developments in Western thought which made it possible for people to disbelieve in God. Up until about the 1800s, it was unthinkable that anyone should question the idea that there was a Supreme Being, a supernatural force that took an interest in human affairs, could be persuaded to rule in one's favor, and generally permeated Western culture with its presence.

A growing understanding of the scientific principles which govern the universe, a skepticism about commonly accepted stories of creation and miracle, and increasing faith in human intelligence were some of the factors which created an environment in which human beings feel more free to believe or not believe in a Supreme Being.

My words today are intended to be not a persuasive argument for or against the existence of a Supreme Being or God, but rather an examination of the many names we give this mystery we cannot understand and some thoughts about the effect of language and education on thinking, with an eye to how radical fundamentalist religion has skewed any conversation about God.

In Islam, a religion that expects profound and ritualized worship and prayer of its adherents, the ninety nine names of God are used as a prayer device, and it is said that “whoever commits them to memory will get into Paradise.” The names range from “The Compassionate” and “The Merciful” through “The Just” and “The Dominant”.

The ninety nine names of God as recited by faithful Muslims are beautiful and contradictory. How can a being be both infinitely merciful and infinitely just? Infinitely compassionate and infinitely dominant? It’s not easy to understand.

Other believers often turn to metaphor to describe our own concept of God. Our first hymn today, “Bring Many Names”, uses several metaphors to describe the idea of God. None of them is adequate on its own; all of them together do not adequately describe the concept of God.

But we give names in order to understand something, to communicate feeling, to define something we want to talk about, something we want to express to others.

Millennia ago, when human beings first began to develop methods for coping with a world of mystery and danger, they evolved two ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge. Scholars have called these two ways *mythos* and *logos*.

Both were essential, complementary to each other; both were ways of arriving at truth and each had its own special area of competence.

Mythos was regarded as primary; it was concerned with what was thought to be timeless and constant in human existence. *Mythos* was not concerned with practical matters, but with meaning. The *mythos* of a society provided people with a way of making sense of their day to day lives. It directed their attention to the eternal and universal, rooted in the unconscious mind. We might think of it as an ancient form of psychology.

Mythos explained things that were otherwise unexplainable. *Mythos* could not be demonstrated by rational proof; its insights were intuitive, like art, music, poetry, dance. It only became reality when it was embodied in ritual and ceremony which evoked a sense of sacred significance in human living. *Mythos* expressed the inner life.

Logos, or the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled humans to function well in the world, was equally important. *Logos* relates to facts and external realities and works efficiently and effectively in the everyday world.

Logos forges ahead and tries something new, elaborates on old insights, achieves greater control over externals, invents something novel and fresh. *Logos* expressed the outer life.

Logos had its limitations. It could not assuage human pain or sorrow, could make no sense of tragedy, could not answer questions about the ultimate value of human life. That was the bailiwick of *mythos*, not *logos*.

In those olden days, both *mythos* and *logos* were regarded as indispensable, essentially distinct with separate jobs to do. Over the centuries, however, the two have become intertwined, entangling pragmatic action with folk mythology and apocalyptic fantasies.

Driven by this confused mix of *mythos* and *logos*, our human successes in science and technology gradually led modern humans to believe that *logos* is the only means to truth and to begin to discount *mythos* as false and superstitious. The new world we were creating seemed to contradict the old mythical spirituality. This has led to a rise in radical fundamentalist religious belief, of which I will speak later.

It has also led to a world today where *mythos* and *logos* entangled create pain for people in the name of God, where ancient stories and customs are interpreted as justification for cruelty and abuse---in the name of God. We have seen much of this kind of cruelty and abuse in our own lifetimes.

Mythic stories from the Christian and Hebrew scriptures have been used to justify racism, homophobia, slavery, subjugation of women and children and other cruel abuses of power. When a myth, a legendary story, is used as literal truth, abuses of power often are the result.

Much of the disbelief I hear about from my atheist and agnostic friends has to do with this abuse of power. Many are uncomfortable with the idea of God because it is so susceptible to abuse.

Human beings who conflate *mythos* and *logos* are the ones who think that God hates gays or that Americans must be killed because of their values. It is not “God” who behaves this way but humans who think they have a mandate from God.

The assumption of a mandate from an all-powerful, supernatural being is what sent jetliners through the World Trade Towers. The assumption of a mandate from an all-powerful supernatural being is what causes the Rev. Fred Phelps and his minions to picket the funerals of AIDS victims and weddings of same-sex couples with their ugly rhetoric. This assumed mandate may have influenced our born-again president to disregard the United Nations and world opinion, as he ordered US troops into battle without international backing.

One of the things I’ve become aware of, as I’ve read and have talked with a variety of people, is that education and experience affect one’s belief or nonbelief in the idea of God.

In a debate between scholars of religion and philosophy, Dr. Kai Nielsen, arguing for atheism, says that belief in God is irrational for someone who has a good scientific and philosophic education. He believes that education and an understanding of logic and language can change one’s thinking about abstract concepts. For Dr. Nielsen, God is a problematic conception, because of the inadequacy of language to define mystery. He looks at the concept of God through the lens of *logos*.

But many believe in God despite a good scientific and philosophic education and understanding of logic and language. Many have a strong need, a deep desire to be connected to something beyond themselves, something they call God, in spite of the evil perpetrated in God's name, in spite of the difficulty of explaining themselves. They look at God through the lens of *mythos*.

Our own experiences as human beings lead us to interpret the idea of God in different ways. I know several adults who were raised much the same I was, with a strong Christian upbringing and the expectation that we would remain Christian and always believe the things we were taught about God. However, whereas I am still comfortable with theism, they are not.

Their experiences shaped them differently, caused them to explore different paths. Their thoughts and beliefs about the idea of God have emerged in different ways. Some feel they have outgrown a need to explore the idea of God and consider it a waste of time. Some speak of God in terms of nature, of creativity, of natural law.

There is a continuum of nonbelief, I have noticed, from anti-theism or being against belief in God, on the one hand, to atheism, or a non-attachment to the idea of God, and to agnosticism, or a not-knowing about the idea of God. People have arrived at these positions through a variety of valid human experiences and their own thought process.

Sometimes nonbelievers turn to ridicule and religion-bashing to support their point of view. I have occasionally turned to the cable program “BunkBusters”, which is a weekly broadcast from the group called United States Atheists. Frequently that broadcast is a diatribe against religion, focussing on the misdeeds of humans in the name of God, rather than an intelligible discourse about ethics and humanism. Rather than promoting the strengths of intellectual nonbelief, they seem to prefer targeting others’ beliefs. This seems to me to be an example of conflating *mythos* and *logos*.

There is a continuum of belief, I also think, from belief in a personal, judgmental, human-like God, to belief in a mechanistic watchmaker type God, to belief in a process of ongoing creation as God.

Believers, too, often ridicule nonbelievers, or challenge their nonbelief. “Atheist” was a common insult in early times and still is used by some camps today to discredit others.

Language and thought about the idea of God are powerful and can be cruelly used. And that brings me to thoughts about radical fundamentalism, an approach to religion which can emerge from any faith tradition, even Unitarian Universalism.

Fundamentalism is a term that was applied originally to Christian sects which attempted to return to the fundamentals of Christian faith as laid out in the Christian and Hebrew scriptures but now extends to those of any religious tradition who feel that their values and beliefs are under fire, are in danger from modern life.

They are embattled forms of religion which have emerged as a response to what they see as a crisis. They are in conflict with enemies whose secular policies and beliefs seem opposed to their religion. They may experience this conflict as a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil. They fear annihilation and try to fortify their beleaguered identity by selectively retrieving certain doctrines and practices of the past. The current furor about same-sex marriage seems to be an example of this kind of fearful reaction.

They are, of all religionists, most likely to conflate, to combine, to entangle *mythos* (the stories, rituals, and arts of a people and religious culture which express universal themes) with *logos* (the rational, pragmatic, logical policies that carry a people forward in time and space).

To protect themselves, they may withdraw from mainstream society to form a counterculture and create an ideology that offers the faithful a plan of action with which they attempt to reform a secular world.

So much of the conversation about the idea of God is negatively influenced by our knowledge of and disgust at the atrocities committed by those who consider themselves under orders from God to punish others.

How can we engage in meaningful conversation about an idea which is so important to so many people? Whether we are believers or nonbelievers, the meaning of “God” as a construct affects our lives.

It may be that our conflicts about this idea emerge from the conflation of *mythos* and *logos*, that we have not realized that the *mythos* of many cultures has created a portrait of God that is impossible to accept for those of us who rely on *logos* for our understandings.

In recent years, process theologians have tried to untangle the mythical/logical mess of thinking about God. Process theologians describe God as creativity, as a process of creation, rather than a being. Process theology recognizes that our understanding of truth, especially as it relates to concepts of God and human beings, is in need of constant growth. It promotes the idea that human nature is continually being nudged in the direction of growth and transformation.

I challenge us to open our selves to the fullest possible range of human emotion, mind and will, that we might continue to grow in self-awareness, self-understanding, and compassion for others. I challenge us to examine our thinking about the idea of God, to untangle the confused threads of *mythos* and *logos* which may be hampering our search, in order to find for ourselves an understanding of the mysterious power beyond human power that is the product of our best minds and hearts, whether we are believers or nonbelievers.

It may be immaterial whether there is a God or not. It is important that we are open and striving for the fullest possible mind, heart, and will. And wherever that leads us, we are blessed and will bless others.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #343, "A Firemist and a Planet".

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 we have a responsibility to ourselves and to each other, to think clearly, to love deeply, and to offer compassion and understanding to those we encounter on the path. May our lives be full of hope and may we share that hope with others. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.