

Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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The Guy in the Sky

*Adapted from a sermon preached at First Unitarian Church
of Albuquerque, New Mexico*

*by the Rev. Christine Robinson
on November 12, 2006*

Last fall, the researchers at Baylor University made an amazing discovery; while 91 percent of Americans say they believe in God, they have such different images and understandings of this God that they might as well be using four different words. The Baylor folks named four images, found that each was most prevalent in a different parts of the country, and learned that, to a considerable extent, they correlate with voting patterns.

About one-third of Americans, especially Southerners, believe in what the Baylor folks called an Authoritarian God. The Authoritarian God is angry at earthly sin and disobedience and is willing to inflict divine retribution. These folks tend to be politically conservative.

Somewhat less than a third of Americans, especially in the West, believe in a Distant, Abstract God: a higher power or great spirit that is at the heart of the world or in human hearts, nudging things, if at all, only within the keepings of natural law. These folks tend to be political liberals. Lots of UUs in this group.

Another large group of Americans, a bit less than a third, focused in the Midwest, believe in a Benevolent God. This God sets standards for behavior, but is also forgiving. Amongst the standards these folks believe God set is love of neighbor and care for the poor. They tend to be political moderates, and swaying this group to cast Democratic votes was a huge part of last week's Democratic victory.

Critical God. This second-smallest group of Americans, after the atheists and agnostics, believe in God but are not particularly involved in religion because they don't think that God is very involved in the world. Their picture of God resembles the high school principal, tucked away in his office, pouring over the permanent record of his students. These folks tend to be independents and economic conservatives and live in the Northeast.

When the *Wall Street Journal* reported this study and its categories of God images, they put out a call for other possible images of God, and their readers obliged them with volleys of ever-more creative emails, which they posted

on their Web site. Readers came up with, for instance:

- Totalitarian God—I am everywhere, and I am watching you.
- Multitasking God—I answer prayers by phone, fax, and BlackBerry, all at the same time.
- Passive-aggressive God—“Go ahead, sin if you want to. Don’t worry about my wrath.”
- Obsessive-compulsive God—I wash my hands of you, hundreds of times a day.
- Narcissistic God—I worship...myself.
- Codependent God—So, are you saying I’m enabling these people to sin so that they’ll need me?
- Customer service God—“Press 1 for the Father, 2 for the Son, 3 for the Holy Spirit.”
- Unitarian God—Nice enough guy, but doesn’t really seem to believe in himself.
- Progressive God—I’ve outgrown the simplistic belief in my own literal existence. I consider myself spiritual but not religious.
- Sports God—You might call me a distant God, but occasionally I intervene when a big play is needed.
- Hertz Rent-a-God—I put you in the driver’s seat.
- Avis Rent-a-God—I try harder.
- Enterprise Rent-a-God—I’ll pick you up.
- Visa God—I’m everywhere you want me to be.
- MasterCard God—Priceless.
- American Express God—Don’t leave home without me.
- Budweiser God—This God’s for you.
- Windows God—Plug and pray.
- Google God—For those who are always searching.
- Chairman God—I set the agenda, but I don’t get involved in day-today operations. I’m God, and I approved these messages. *These messages prayed for by the people of Planet Earth.*

When people tell me—as they do with some frequency—that they do not believe in God, I always respond sympathetically. I’ve been there, myself. I was raised that way—a proud atheist child of self-assured atheist parents. So I know; it is a hard confession sometimes. It’s a confession that often comes with a painful story. Of how the deepest and most anguished prayers for the health of a loved one were not answered. Or how the God who had seemed so close to the child had seemed to withdraw and abandon the teen, who was left to wonder, “Did I do something wrong?” Or how the amount of pain and evil in the world just didn’t compute with the only image of God on offer: an obviously impossible God who is both all good and all powerful and somehow in charge of this cruel world. So I’m very sympathetic with atheism and have only to look at my own family to see examples of lives lived in meaning, service, and love to know that God doesn’t have to be a part of anyone’s life for that life to be very good, indeed.

After I listen to the reasons someone doesn't believe in God, I ask, sympathetically, what kind of God they don't believe in. And I almost always get this answer: "I don't believe in the old man who sits on a throne in the clouds." I think it is interesting that not once has anyone ever told me that they don't believe in the God who lives on the mountaintop...although that's actually where the ancient Hebrews whose stories are collected in the Old Testament thought God lived. But not even the most literal of Biblical literalists teach that any more.

I *have* heard people say that they don't believe in the kind of God who strikes you dead with lightning, although that kind of God is nowhere to be found in Biblical imagery; it comes from Greek stories about a Zeus that nobody believes in any more. For some reason, it's the guy in the sky who has captured the imagination of later-day Americans; that's the kind of God they don't believe in.

There have been a couple of books about the Guy in the Sky on the bestseller lists lately: *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris and *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. Both take on the Guy in the Sky, excoriate Him for all the nasty things humans have done in His name, and declare Him an illusion that is childish and foolish and bad for society. They go so far as to say that even moderate, peaceful, and universal belief in the guy in the sky is bad because it leaves the door open for fanatics. Seemingly oblivious to the terrible uses to which atheism, science, rationality, capitalism, materialism, and any number of nonreligious philosophies have *also* been put in our world, they crusade on, touting their own kind of intolerant extremism as a cure for the world's ills. The great benefit of these books is that they present such a cartoon version of religion that lots of religious and nonreligious people are talking about what they really do and don't believe, and how it informs how they act in the world.

Dawkins, Harris, and others don't seem to understand the fact that most people believe in God, not because they were told to and are too stupid to question what they've been told, but because they have had experiences with something they name "God." The fact that those experiences are hard to describe and impossible to prove to others does not keep those who actually have them from trusting their own experience. While these experiences tend to be compelling and life changing, they are short on detail; for detail we human beings have to turn to the stories and images of God that are available to us in our culture. Some of those stories and images are old, like God the King. Some are new, like Mother Goddess. Some are problematic. There's no doubt that the jealous, avenging God image can lead people into violence and war. Some are helpful, powerful, and healing. Think about, "This is my song, oh God of All the nations, a song of peace, for their land, and for mine."

Dismissing all images and understandings of God as foolish and harmful because some are, is as silly as dismissing all of Christmas because the merchant class has made it into a season of materialistic madness. (Hmmm...maybe that's

not such a bad idea...no? There are parts of Christmas that are warm and wonderful, good and holy? Okay. We keep Christmas. We just stay out of stores.) When I was a kid, I had a friend whose parents protected their child from the “lie” of Santa Claus. They didn’t want to face the day when their kid figured out for herself the physics of flying reindeer. There was no Santa in that home. I felt very sorry for her! My parents took a softer stand. They made it known that Santa was a lovely game, not to be believed in, but enjoyed as the personification of the spirit of giving that makes the season fun, and which is, itself, absolutely real and very precious. Perhaps that’s why, although I was raised an atheist, I eventually moved into a similar stance with God, and came to believe that that word was a lovely picture, not to be taken literally but to be enjoyed as a personification for an absolutely real and very precious spirit of love and growth in our world. And I, too, have had experiences of that spirit, which I can explain in no other way that confirm the existence of this elusive reality and which I cherish to the depth of my being.

Maybe you have not had such experiences. Or maybe you have, but you call them by another name. In this church that’s just fine. This church is dedicated to the proposition that each person must follow their own experience and name it and follow it’s promptings with all the integrity they can muster. The atheist of character, who says, “I have considered my own experience and come to believe that this life is all we have and it’s up to us to care for each other and learn and grow and contribute” is absolutely respected here. So is the person who has come to find, in her deepest heart, the great mother, the loving father, or the impersonal but still powerful urge to grow and love. So is the person who simply says, “It’s a great mystery, and we will never know.”

That kind of diversity of religious expression is not unheard of in religious congregations, but it is usually overlaid with a doctrinal structure that may or may not be taken literally or even seriously. The price of admission to most churches, no matter what your theology, is de facto assent to one set of stories, images, and ideas about God, which don’t fit everyone very well. Unitarian Universalism does not have that requirement. Instead, the price of admission to this church is a respectful, hopefully curious, tolerance of what others believe and the variety of ways they celebrate what they believe.

So when it comes to the Guy in the Sky, we hold many opinions; we remain aware that the universe and its deep doings are a mystery we can never completely fathom. Even science is coming to this conclusion; while using its techniques to learn everything it can, what it learns is that once things are larger than galaxies and smaller than electrons, common sense and straightforward rationality no longer apply.

Between the straightjacket of nineteenth-century science, which does not allow us to refer to anything that can not be studied with its tools, and the straitjacket of the guy in the sky, who has no relationship to nature’s laws, there are many ideas, many images, many theologies, many names.

I'd like to say a few words about God images that are represented in two of our hymns this morning. The first is "Bring Many Names," #23. It's an attempt to enlarge the overwhelmingly masculine image of God most traditional believers have, so it's a hymn for those who think of God in a personal way. It's also the loveliest new tune in this book, in my opinion, so even if these images are not your cup of tea, I hope you'll enjoy it.

So there was once a little boy who was afraid of the dark, and who ended up in his parent's bed, night after night. Since this little boy believed in God, his father tried this tactic to keep the little boy in his own bed. "Son," he said, "you don't have to be afraid at night, because God is in your room with you, watching over you." The little boy looked sadly at his father and replied, "I need somebody with skin."

And while many fathers, at least for the moment, would give in to this one, in the end, Daddy or Father Time, is going to sit this kid down and say as kindly and sadly as he can, "Honey, you've got to learn to manage your monsters, your fears, and your awakesness in the dark, because God doesn't have skin, and sweetie, even if I didn't need *my* sleep, which I do, someday you'll discover that even the warmth of another human being is not enough to ward off the monsters and fears and awakesness in the dark, and you have to find, in yourself, a place of peace and sustenance to get you through the dark nights."

That place of peace and sustenance, called by many names, is the goal of both theistic and nontheistic spiritual practice, and those who can find it when they need it have a priceless resource for their lives. Our center, harmony, opening our heart to God, feeling the touch of spirit—the words associated with this are many. We often need to cue ourselves to get into this mental and emotional space; that's what postures, meditation beads, and memorized prayers and hymns often do for people, although there's also the good cry, near exhaustion, or other ways of throwing in the towel of control and being open to what comes to us.

Hymn #8 was written by the Czech Unitarian minister rounded up by the Gestapo before World War II. His hymn, "Mother Spirit, Father Spirit," gives us another set of images of the divine, much less personal, in spite of the Mother Father language. Norbert Capek, whose faith sustained him even in a concentration camp, found the divine in nature and in the depth of himself.

I'll end with a description of a cartoon strip:

The Rev. Will B. Dunn is sitting at his old typewriter, ready to write his "Tell It to the Preacher" newspaper column. Cartoon frame by cartoon frame, he reads a letter, looking pretty serious: "Dear Preacher, Do you address the Supreme Being as the 'Eternal Thou' like Buber...or do you prefer Tillich's 'Ground of Being' or his 'Ultimate Concern'...or Whitehead's 'Principle of Concretion'...or do you use Hegel's 'Absolute Spirit' or even Otto's 'Mysterium

Tremendum?” Signed, Seeker.

Rev. Dunn turns to his typewriter and begins his answer: “Dear Seeker, I address the Supreme Being as ‘God.’” In the final frame, he breaks into a smile as he writes, “But you say it Yahweh, and I’ll say it mine.”

That’s so UU! You say it Yahweh; I’ll say it mine. You think of MasterGod; I’ll think of a tree. You go for personal answers to prayer; I’ll take the beauty of the day and the word of meditation that spoke directly to me. You take your clearest-eyed look around and choose atheism; I look deep within me and find the Spirit of Life. We come to church to celebrate the astounding variety of ways Mystery finds words within us, and honor all who come with open hearts. The diversity of faith and expression is what makes us most uniquely who we are as a religious community. It’s a workshop for peace in our ever-smaller world.