



"The gods I don't believe in "  
Claudia Hall  
May 24, 2009

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

### Sermon

N.T. Wright, an Anglican Bishop, once said that when he was a chaplain at Oxford he would sometimes be confronted by students who would say that they did not need a chaplain, because they did not believe in God. His reply was always, "tell me what God you don't believe in, because I doubt I believe in him either". In that spirit, this sermon is about the gods we do, and don't, believe in.

Today we celebrate Mohammed's birthday. Mohammed was searching for a God he could believe in. He did not find a god he could claim in Judaism, in Christianity, or in the tribal religions of his day. But he persevered, and his search led him to the revelation we call Islam. His search is not new, many of us have been on a journey in our life to find something we can believe in, something to call our own. Many of us have left other religions because they featured a god or gods we could not believe in. In fact, many of us have gods we do not believe in, some of mine are as follows:

First, there is the old-man-in-the-sky. This is the stern old man in the sky, sitting on a big throne, long white beard blowing in the wind as he waits to dispense judgment. The chief characteristics of this god are wrath, anger, judgment, and hate. Many of us grew up afraid of this god, because he only loved you if you never did anything wrong. The idea of god as a punishing, abusive old man has stuck with many, especially when the metaphor of god as father includes the idea that god is so stern he would send his child to death rather than change his mind. This is a god of anger and pain that has driven many of us away from any image of god, especially as 'father'. The advantage of this god is you know that if you play by the rules, you are fine. The downside is that it is a black and white god in a shades-of-gray world. This god is the harsh punisher, only concerned about your deeds and how they do or do not fit you for the afterlife. Conversely, the second god I don't believe in goes too far the other direction. I call this god the celestial Santa Claus

The celestial Santa Claus is the god who gives you what you wish for. Power, money, success, fame, wealth...just pray hard enough and have enough faith and this god will provide. In this theology you can tell who has faith by their material possessions. If a person is wealthy, successful and prosperous, they have faith. However, disease, failure and a lack of resources are seen as either trials sent by god or as a sign of a lack of faith. Either way,



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the person is never challenged to confront society about what should change so all can have an equal chance.

Further, while the old-man-in-the-sky only cares about your soul when you die, the celestial Santa Claus only cares about who dies with the most toys. The problem is, neither of these gods cares about social justice, compassion or making the world a better place for all persons. Even more, the very saints and prophets we revere in every religion were not materially successful. The god of the Jewish people and the original Christian understanding is a god that sides with the poor and oppressed, who humbles the proud. Santa Claus may be nice for children, but not as a god.

Another god that isn't very concerned with caring for the planet is the god I call the mirror image. This god thinks I am the best, and that I know everything. This god cares about me first, I am saved and therefore better than the rest of the unrepentant fiends. This god loves what I love, hates what I hate, and allows me to justify anything because I know my god's will since it is identical to my own. This is the god of 9/11, the crusades, clinic bombings, church burnings and every other human atrocity committed in the name of the holy. The advantage of this god is obvious, I am always right. However, the downside is that this god is merely a projection of my own whims, but it is a projection that has done enormous harm and caused many, many problems and tragedies between people.

This god is a polarized negative of the final major god I don't believe in, the one I call the Puppet-master. The Puppet-master is a petulant, vindictive god that sees the world as playthings. This god dictates everything, is solely responsible for good and evil, and takes personal gratification from manipulating the fates and lives of us all. The advantage this god has is that we are not responsible for making anything better, the downside is that we are just toys to be discarded at the whim of this vicious deity.

As UU's, we have the distinct privilege of choosing to believe in a god, and which one(s) we believe in. Our purposes and principles teach us that one of our main sources of religious revelation is our "Direct experience of transcendent wonder and mystery". What does that mean for each of us? One way of looking at it is to say that we all have a small part of the infinite, thus thinking about it, contemplating it, and sharing our piece are important to the whole. Thus, the importance of religious community in helping us share our pieces of the problem. However, naming and labeling the infinite reduces it by necessity, since we are finite beings discussing in finite terms the infinite universe.



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Accepting that fact, that by discussing the infinite we limit it, allows us to express our direct experience without rejecting the direct experience of others, but it also allows us to take a stand on issues and causes, which are the direct human cost of belief, without degrading the basic human rights of others. This weaves a way between the extremes of giving God all the credit (and blame), and denying anything greater than our point of view.

In addition to expressing our experience of the infinite, religious faith is important because it makes positive claims on our life. We are not defined religiously by what we don't believe in. For example, what defines Islam is not that they are not Jewish or not Christian. What defines Islam is their particular way of connecting and expressing the Infinite. We know this as the Five Pillars of Islam, and their holy revelations in the Koran. This way of connecting to and expressing the infinite is neither Jewish nor Christian, it is a separate, cohesive, and affirmative faith in and of itself.

Unitarian Universalism struggles with the affirmative aspect of our religious life. We know what we do not believe in, just as Mohammed knew that his experience of other religions did not describe his experience of the Holy. However, if he had stopped with rejecting other religions, he would have never had the experiences that led to the founding of Islam. Merely rejecting what does not fit is not enough, religious life is also about affirming the things that do fit, finding what you know and believe and understand to be true and affirming that experience in community.

The challenge for each of us as UU's is to experience, explore, and discuss our experience of the infinite in positive terms. Don't allow others to reduce your experience to a simple rejection of what they say you should experience. Look for the positive, for what you can affirm religiously, your experience of the holy. Explore, experience, discuss in community and within your own heart the mystery of life and your connection to what is greater. Giving in to other people's gods, and not believing in them, means giving up the ability to claim and express your own personal experience of connection to the infinite.

As UU's we are not required to have a particular belief about the infinite, but I want to encourage each of us to explore for ourselves the god(s) we do or don't believe in, instead of allowing other people to name the infinite for us. Our religion is about positive, life-affirming choices and experiences in everything we do. Let's apply that standard to our discussions of the infinite as well, and talk about the positive, life-affirming connections we have



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with the Holy. As we go out this week, do not be afraid to claim your direct experience of the Infinite, and do not let others define that for you. Claim the gods you do believe in, your experience of the Holy, and live that out in everything you do. Peace go with you. Amen, and Blessed Be.