One God, At Most

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Do you have an elevator speech? If you got in an elevator at he seventh floor and someone asked you what Unitarian Universalism is, cold you explain it before you got to the ground floor?

For years my elevator speech has been "Unitarian Universalism is a religion based on the proposition that some questions are too important to have only one right answer." And on my car there is a bumper sticker which says "God is too big to fit into any one religion." But I think for brevity, the title of this sermon is as good as it gets: "One God, at most."

Dick Fewkes and a few other colleagues say this saying comes from Adlai Stevenson, the last Unitarian nominated by a major party to be President. I have not been able to verify this with the Internet, but Mr. Stevenson was a very great man, and I am willing to attribute it to him.

For the very name Unitarian implies one God; it signifies a rejection of the Christian trinity. When you travel the town greens of Massachusetts, you will see that the old churches, the ones set up as the town church centuries ago, are often called First Parish. Many of these churches had a theological struggle in the 1820s, and where the orthodox won these churches are today United Church of Christ, as is the original church here in Chatham. Where the liberals won, that church is today Unitarian Universalist, and you will often see another church nearby which the orthodox members of that original church set up for themselves when the liberals won, and often it is called Trinitarian congregationalist so that no one will confuse it theologically with the Unitarians next door.

This week in the workshop I am conducting, we have been reading Karen Armstrong's fine account of the three great monotheistic faiths, *A History of God*. This shows that the debate over monotheism is much broader and deeper than New England town greens. In fact, within the history of Judaism and Christianity, you can perceive a dialectic at work. There is a spectrum of beliefs about the number and nature of divinities. At one end you have the Vedic Brahman, which, as Armstrong describes it is the ground of all being but is largely impersonal:

> "Brahman does not speak to mankind. It cannot meet men and women; it transcends all such human activities. Nor does it respond to us in a personal way: sin does not 'offend' it and it cannot be said to 'love' us or be 'angry'. [1]"

[1]Armstrong, Kaen, *A History of God*, New York: Random House 1993, p. 29

Near that end of the spectrum we would also put Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, and the Eighteenth Century Deist's watchmaker. These are purely single Gods who may have created it all, but don't have much to say or interact with humankind in the present. They are wholly other, shrouded in mystery, language fails us. And as a practical matter, so does religion, for there is little practical benefit or emotional comfort in worshiping an entity so remote.

At other end of the spectrum is pantheism – the idea that everything is God. And in between lies polytheism and what I will cal modified monotheism.

We know polytheism from the classical pantheons of the Greeks and Romans, but Armstrong starts from the polytheisms of the ancient middle East, from the Mesopotamian myths of Marduk and the related Canaanite cults of Baal and Asherah. It was these religions which the Jews encountered as they moved into Canaan after the Exodus from Egypt.

We think of Jews as strictly monotheist. Devout Jews recite the Shema every day, the affirmation we said this morning. Shema means listen, and it is the first word of this affirmation: Listen Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is one. Sounds like pure monotheism, right?

But Armstrong shows that Jews came late to monotheism; ee say that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are the three great monotheistic faiths, and we sometimes call them the Abrahamic faiths after their supposed common ancestor. But Armstrong asserts that it is probable that the God worshiped by Abraham was a different God than the one worshiped by Moses.

Abraham's God may have been El, the High God of the Canaanites. The word Elohim is the common name for God used by one fo the four sources whom scholars think wrote the Torah and much of the Hebrew Bible. Elohim is a friendly figure who appears to Abraham disguised as a stranger. Abraham interacts with him in a perfectly normal manner.

By contrast the God that Moses dealt with is usually referred to as YHVH, for he is so great it is considered an impiety to use his full name. In the old spelling it is Jehovah, but we now refer to this God as Yahweh. Yahweh is so terrifying during the Exodus that the Israelites cannot deal with him directly, they must send Moses up to the mountaintop to get the law.

Unlike Brahman or Aristotle's God, Jahweh was a god of action; unlike the pagan deities of Canaan, God acted in history. The problem of Jewish history is that bad things were always happening to the supposedly chosen people; late in that history, the explanation was developed that bad things happened because the Jewish people strayed from the covenant that God had made with them.

So we have this confusion of names for God and confusion of characters. A god who could disguise himself as a person; to a terrifying being whom one could not look upon and live.

Armstrong says that the early Jewish practice shows that after the Jewish people returned from Egypt and took possession of Canaan, they practicing a syncretistic religion, worshiping Yahweh along with the local pagan deities such as Baal and Asherah. Yahweh had promised them the land beyond the Jordan, and had made good on that promise as they were given military victories over the local tribes. One of Yahweh's attributes was the word sabaoth, which means hosts. I had always heard the phrase, "Lord God of Hosts," as in the reading I did from Isaiah, but I had never seen this as military, until Armstrong reminded me that one meaning of "host" is "army." Yahweh was a great military God, but wasn't so good at raising crops, so the Israelite farmers would hedge their bets by satisfying both Yahweh and Baal. Shrines to Asherah, the Canaanite fertility goddess, were even found in the Temple in Jerusalem.

There were periodic attempts to stamp out pagan worship, and after the Babylonian captivity, these succeeded. It was only after the Jews had been put through the trauma of those years that the Hebrew Bible took its present form, and monotheism was adopted in theory and in practice.

But even then, the pure monotheism of Yahweh was tempered by three ideas which made God accessible. The first of these was *kavod*, or the glory of God. This was not God as God was in God's self, but a manifestation of God. It is usually described as light or fire, as in the description of Mt. Sinai when Moses got the law from God.

A second aspect of God discussed particularly in the commentary was Shekinah, or the presence of God. As Armstrong says,

"The rabbis expressed this as a paradox: 'God is the place of the world, but the world is not his place.'"[2] The shekinah became particularly important after the destruction of the second Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. As the Jews moved into permanent diaspora, God's presence was conceived to be everywhere Jews lived.

A third mediating concept was hochma, or Wisdom. Wisdom was a quality which humans could possess, though it originated in God. The Bible, and the Apocrypha, contains several books which are part of Wisdom literature. Wisdom in Hebrew is grammatically female, and some commentators have seized upon this as imparting a feminine cast to the concept.

There is much more to say about Judaism, but I want to move on to Christianity. Orthodox Christianity asserts it is monotheistic, but in the Fourth Century developed the doctrine of the Trinity.

Armstrong points out that Jesus never claimed to be divine; the term son of God was used

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[2]Armstrong, *id.*, p. 74.

as it had been used in the Hebrew Bible to mean a human being.

St. Paul, who was the earliest Christian writer, according to Armstrong, never claimed divinity for Jesus, and neither did the Gospel writers. I disagree with her as far as John, for it seems to me plain that when John says the word became flesh and dwelt among us, he is articulating the classic idea of the incarnation.

And the problem is the incarnation – the idea that God became flesh is blasphemy to Jews and was also to early Unitarians such as Servetus and Francis David back in the Sixteenth Century CE. Servetus could find no evidence of incarnation in the scriptures. David, after having won acceptance for idea of Jesus' humanity, was then condemned because he insisted that Jesus could not be the object of prayers. Both men were martyred for their Unitarian monotheism.

Yet the Trinity, like the Jewish ideas of Glory, presence and wisdom, serves the functions of mediating monotheism, making God accessible, making God meaningful. In the classic Nicean formulation, Jesus effects the salvation of humankind and, because he is historical and human, is a figure that the worshipper can identify with.

Holy spirit, like wisdom dwells in every breast.

To this point some of you have been mildly interested but have been saying to yourselves "what does any of this have to do with me?" I reject God and and am not interested in whether I'm rejecting one, two, three or a million.

I can't answer this question for you, but it seems to me that if we acknowledge any sacred dimension of life, and we believe ourselves to be a religious community, we have to wonder whether we approach it the same way.

We are pretty sure that we can have individual conceptions of the holy; that's what we gamble on, that's the whole meaning of religious covenant in a contemporary UU church.

But we have to wonder whether there is anything in common among what we hold holy and if so what. Emerson said, "a man will worship something, you can be sure of that."

While it is deep and central to our tradition that we can each choose the object of our worship, I submit to you that there is still such a thing as idolatry in Unitarian Universalism; there are false Gods.

My elevator speech says some questions are too important to have only one right answer, but there are some answers which are clearly wrong. If I say the most important thing in life, the ultimate God I will worship is money, or fame, or intellectual achievement, we can agree that this is not very religious.

What one thing do we worship? What do we love with all our hearts and minds and strengths?

And while you're pondering that, I will say to those of you supremely unintersted in any problems of theology, that the question of whether God is one or many is only a variant on the question of whether you are one or many and whether reality is one or many.

What about you – are you one self? We are used to thinking of the self as one thing, the individual, and as a practical matter we have to think this way for our culture is founded on individualism and individual responsibility. But for centuries people have held that there are devils which get into a person and make them do what they wouldn't do. And in the scientific age, along came Freud with his ideas of the subconscious. Freud's trinity are Ego, superego and id.

Buddhism holds that the self is an illusion that each of us is a bundle of qualities which adapts to the demands of the moment.

Questions of God raise mysteries on the outside, but there are mysteries enough on the inside. Why doe I keep doing the things that I know I shouldn't do, and why is it I never can seem to do the things I know I should? Why in the world did I say that thing to Alice last week that has her not speaking to me? What was I thinking when I bought that car, or dress, or house?

But that's only at the personal level. More cosmically, is reality one or many? Religious naturalism starts from the world described by scince and says this is what is, this is what we have to work with. But science knows neither God nor the soul; many of us are practicing dualists: we find that science cannot account for the rich life that happens within our own heads and hearts, and cannot account for the majesties of the Mona Lisa or Beethoven's Ninth. Science may answer the how, but it cannot answer the why.

Many of us will reject the idea that there is a supernatural plane on which God and other forces operate, but we will cling to the idea that there is a spiritual dimension of life which cannot be accounted for by reason or science.

But even put aside anything spiritual along with anything supernatural and focus on the world as described by science. Is that one world? We might have thought so in Newton's time, or Darwin's. It seemed that the world was governed by one set of physical laws which had existed for all time and which were, at least in theory, knowable.

The along comes relativity and particularly quantum mechanics, and everything is thrown into a cocked hat. Reputable physicists now theorize that this universe is only one of many possible universes, and that the natural laws which seemed so sacrosanct might be different in a parallel universe. Maybe gravity would repel instead of attracting.

To some extent, whether we see God as one or several, whether we see ourselves as one or several, whether we see the universe as one or several, depends on the makeup of our perception. The critic Isaiah Berlin wrote a famous essay on Tolstoy's theory of history called

“The Hedgehog and the Fox,” based on a Greek folk saying< the fox knows many things, the hedgehog knows one big thing. He says that mirror mental types: some people look for the one principle behind all the apparently diverse phenomena we encounter, while others look for that grainy particularity. Some aren’t interested in the particulars unless they can reduce them to the general, and some aren’t interested in the general except to the extent they explain the particular. Some see forests, some see trees. In philosophy, Plato was a hedgehog, Aristotle was a fox. In religion, monotheists tend to be hedgehogs, pagans tend to be foxes.

What is the takeaway here? I suggest that you might consider what it is what you worship in your life, what you hold most dear, and whether that is one thing or many. And whether you are inclined to look at yourself, or the nature of reality as one or many. It might tell you a little bit about what you’re looking at, or it might tell you a little bit about who’s doing the looking.

Amen.

Readings for One God

Opening reading Isaiah 6

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the
hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings:
with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3
And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with
smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a
people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with
a pair of tongs. 7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your
lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord
saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!

Sermon reading

Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, p. 29

In Vedic religion, people had experienced a holy power in the sacrificial ritual. They had called this sacred power Brahman. The priestly caste (known as Brahmanas) were also believed to

possess this power. Since the ritual sacrifice was seen as the microcosm of the whole universe, Brahman gradually came to mean a power which sustains everything. The whole world was seen as the divine activity welling up from the mysterious being of Brahman, which was the inner meaning of all existence. The Upanishads encouraged people to cultivate a sense of Brahman in all things. It was a process of revelation in the literal meaning of the word: it was an unveiling of the hidden ground of all being. Everything that happens became a manifestation of Brahman: true insight lay in the perception of the unity behind the different phenomena. Some of the Upanishads saw Brahman as a personal power but others saw it as strictly impersonal. Brahman cannot be addressed as thou; it is a neutral term, so is neither he nor she; nor is it experienced as the will of a sovereign deity. Brahman does not speak to mankind. It cannot meet men and women; it transcends all such human activities. Nor does it respond to us in a personal way: sin does not 'offend' it and it cannot be said to 'love' us or be 'angry'. Thanking or praising it for creating the world would be entirely inappropriate.