

"What Are Unitarian Universalists Views On God?"  
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Unitarian Universalists in Sarasota and Lakewood Ranch  
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Part of my role as a minister is to explain our religion to the world. It is not always easy. Many people find it hard to believe we can have a church where some people believe in God and some do not.

Yet it is central to who we are. As it says on the back of our order of service, a survey in this church suggested that in our congregation about:

- 40% are Theists
- 38% are Agnostics
- 22% are Atheists

I understand the perspective of the 20 percent of you who are atheists. You tell me the elimination of a belief in God is a sign of progress. If God was necessary in the primitive stages of history, God is irrelevant to an enlightened civilization. What is the need of faith and religion when armed with reason and science? For many of you letting go of a belief in God is liberating and freeing. One atheist wrote:

Theists hold the mistaken idea that atheists and agnostics live miserable or self-centered lives "of unremitting emptiness and despair." But all the atheists I know think life is a magnificent wonder. We too love sunsets, the Grand Canyon, the promontories of Big Sur, all the more miraculous for having been created solely from the laws of nature, no Supreme Being required.

This or something like it is the view of about 20 percent of Unitarian Universalists.

In contrast, one third of Unitarian Universalists, while respecting and welcoming atheists to our community, are not willing to say with certainty that God does not exist. Nor are they willing to say for sure that God does exist.

The word agnostic was invented in 1869 by the English biologist, Thomas Huxley. About Atheists and Theists, Huxley wrote:

They were quite sure they had attained a certain "gnosis"—had, more or

less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble.

*Gnosis* is one of the Greek words for knowledge. Agnostic stands for an absence of knowledge.

Bertrand Russell was born in 1872 and is best known for his work in mathematical logic and for his advocacy of both pacifism and nuclear disarmament. His essay "What is an Agnostic?" is a clear, simple statement on the subject.

An agnostic thinks it impossible to know the truth in matters such as God and the future life with which Christianity and other religions are concerned. Or, if not impossible, at least impossible at the present time. . . . An atheist, like a Christian, holds that we can know whether or not there is a God. The Christian holds that we can know there is a God; the atheist, that we can know there is not. The Agnostic suspends judgment, saying that there are not sufficient grounds either for affirmation or for denial. . . . Most agnostics admire the life and moral teachings of Jesus as told in the Gospels, but not necessarily more than those of certain other men.

I like to quote the bumper sticker that says "MILITANT AGNOSTIC: I DON'T KNOW AND YOU DON'T EITHER."

A Unitarian Universalist woman minister by the name of Joy Atkinson described this view in a 1995 sermon. Rev. Atkinson wrote:

I believe that at the heart of existence is a great mystery. . . . It is not given to us to know for certain the answers to the ultimate questions—the questions I call "Window ledge" questions, because as a child I used to sit on a window ledge and gaze at the stars, pondering: What is the true nature of reality, and of God, if indeed there is a God? Why is there matter, why is there not nothing? Where is the edge of the universe? How and why did it all begin and how will it end? . . .

At the heart of existence is a great mystery. Joy Atkinson's words reflect a fundamental humility, which is what I find most powerful in agnosticism.

This or something like it is the view of about 33 percent of Unitarian Universalists.

However, 49 percent of us say although they respect and welcome atheists and agnostics to our community, they do not identify with either position.

These Unitarian Universalist theists reject the idea of a personal God with human features and human mentality. But, what do Unitarian Universalists mean when they say that they are Theists?

One answer comes from the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, who was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus in 2006. Forrest Church was a leading Unitarian Universalist theologian of my generation. He said,

The surest path to God (the Sacred or the Holy) is to follow not the logic of our minds but the logic of our hearts. All of us suffer. We are broken and in need of healing. We struggle to accept ourselves and forgive others. Aware of our imperfections, we seek more perfect faith, hope, and justice. At our best, we feel our love in others' hearts and rise together in answer to the urgings of conscience. We discover the Holy-its healing and saving power-by acting in harmony. Remember, God is simply our name for the highest power we know. If we define God as love-as good a definition as any-we discover God's nature in our personal experience of love.

We are born into a great mystery. We die into a great mystery. In between--in that little dash between the dates on our tombstone--what we know of God we learn from love's lessons. . . . God is not all-knowing or all-powerful, but all-loving and all-merciful. When love dwells in our hearts, we dwell in God's presence.

Forrest died of cancer in September of 2009, the day after he turned 61. God, he said, is Love.

Another definition popular among Unitarian Universalists was written down by the Jewish scientist Albert Einstein. Einstein said that his "religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection." God is a superior intelligence.

Still other Unitarian Universalist describe themselves as pantheists. Robert Fulghum said, "I know that God is everywhere and in all things." Another Unitarian Universalist

pantheist put it this way,

Pantheists simply believe that all that is sacred, all that is holy arises not from outside the universe, but is the universe. The pantheist says that the sacred encompasses the totality of existence, all humans, all living creatures, even the stars and the planets. All is holy.

Similar to pantheists, other Unitarian Universalist theists are mystics. One Unitarian Universalist minister, Lex Crane, described mysticism this way:

Instead of grasping the world in our minds, as we typically do, by breaking it down into small parts, naming each part, the mystical mode . . . is an awareness (deep, full, sweeping) of the unity of all that is, and of the self as an intimate part of it. The mystical experience at its peak is an intense, sweeping awareness of the whole nature of things, and ourselves an inherent, inseparable part of it all. It is an experience of "all that is" as a meaningful whole.

The mystical is the experience of the unity that exists before we make distinctions, the unity we feel before we create categories such as emotion and reason, mind and body, the individual and all existence.

The mystical experience is *not* a reunification that occurs after the split of emotion and reason, of space and time. The mystical is the experience of the unity that exists before we divide our perception into the forms of space and time. Some Unitarian Universalist mystics are comfortable calling this Unity "God."

Personally, this is how I like to think of God. I experience a unity through the relationships I have with people, with the earth and with works of art like music and paintings. There are moments in relationships when I feel a sense of unity. Most often it is a fleeting intuition of unity. It happens when I notice the color of a flower. It occurs when I exchange a smile with a friend at church Sunday morning. It is the sense of unity I feel when I hear the sounds of beautiful music. It is the momentary feeling of harmony I experience when I hear the lines of a beautiful poem. It is the passing sense of wholeness I feel when I laugh with others.

Through these experiences I believe I encounter the unity that underlies the universe. I believe that this wholeness is essential, if I am to respond in a healthy way to the trials and tragedies of life. Those fleeting times, when I feel a part of this harmony, I find that

life is richer and fuller. Failures and disappointments seem more bearable and grief more acceptable. I do not know how to make this happen for others, except to say that it does seem to arise out of relationships with people, relationships with works of art and relationships with nature.

Atheist, agnostic, theist, pantheism, mysticism. In the end these words are just symbols, just a pattern of dried ink on paper, or just some vibrations produced by our vocal cords. Symbols are inadequate. To quote T.S. Eliot, every attempt to talk about the divine is "a raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment always deteriorating in the general mess of imprecision of feeling."

In the end we choose join or to reject a religious community because of the quality of the relationships that we have together. Far more important than whether we are comfortable with the word God, is whether or not we are comfortable with the people in our religious community.

Beyond our families, the most important organization in our lives should be a religious community. I define a religious community as a fellowship of people who cherish, practice and develop traditions concerning the purpose of human life. There may be a few persons who do not need such a community. However, most of us are too easily distracted from the values to which we want to devote ourselves. A religious community should give support and encouragement to us in living up to the ethical rules of honesty and of keeping our promises, and of being kind to others.

Each of us is responsible for our own theology. Whether you call yourself an atheist or an agnostic or a theist, you are welcome here. Your presence enriches the life of this community. It is good to have you with us.