

Shall We Give God a Second Chance?
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It was spring of my sophomore year in high school. I was 16 – I was a licensed driver. On occasional Saturdays, Don, Jim, and I would drive into Detroit, my beloved Detroit, to do research in the magnificent Detroit Public Library. While there, we would frequently visit Marlowe’s Book Store, a block away. At Marlowe’s, one Saturday, in the back of a magazine, I think it was a *New Republic*, one of us discovered a small ad for *An Atheist’s Manifesto*. Excited by the idea, we all decided to order a copy.

Mine went missing years ago. I think it’s in attic heaven with my baseball cards. Or maybe my mother made it disappear when I was off in college. I found a replacement copy in a used book store several years ago. [Joseph Lewis, *An Atheist’s Manifesto* (New York: Free Thought Press Assn, 1954)]

Though I was brought up Presbyterian, by the time I reached young adulthood, I was a card-carrying atheist. Things changed for me religiously when Kerry introduced me to Unitarian Universalism, and I came to understand that there is a lot more to religion than God.

Things changed again, a couple of decades later, when I went off to seminary – a Methodist seminary – and I quickly realized, there’s nothing to be gained in this place by proclaiming oneself an atheist. I waited patiently for the course when proofs for the existence of God would be studied, and I would come out of the closet, reveal my training in philosophy, and refute the traditional but unrigorous and inadequate God proofs that might be offered. But there was no such course. God was a given, a starting point, not in need of proof, not subject to denial.

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It should not be surprising that early concepts of God were based on the human model, as Robert Wright demonstrates in great detail, in his 2009 book, *The Evolution of God*. *People* were what we knew. So God was like one of us, a person, but better in some way, or at least greater – eternal, for example, or omniscient. But today we find it hard to convince ourselves – or I should say that I find it hard to convince myself – that the real God could be a personal God.

But let’s avoid making assumptions about other people’s concepts of God. Indeed, let’s not assume that they have a concept of God. In a column in the New York Times last May, T.M. Luhrman explained that people like many of us in this room – “university educated liberals” was the term she used – we puzzle over questions like “Why do people believe in God? What is our evidence that there is an invisible agent who has a real impact on our lives? How can [traditional believers] be so confident?” She continues:

These are the questions that university-educated liberals ask about faith. They are deep questions. But they are also abstract and intellectual. They are philosophical questions. In an evangelical church, the questions would probably have circled around how to *feel* God's love and how to be more aware of God's presence. Those are fundamentally practical questions.

Not all members of deeply theologically conservative churches — churches that seem to have such clear-cut rules about how people should behave and what they should believe — they haven't all made up their minds about *whether* God exists or *how* God exists. In a charismatic evangelical church I studied, people often made comments that suggested that they had complicated ideas about God's realness. One devout woman said in a prayer group one evening: "I don't believe it, but I'm sticking to it. That's my definition of faith." [T. M. Luhrmann, "Belief Is the Least Part of Faith," *New York Times*, May 29, 2013. Tanya Marie Luhrmann is a professor of anthropology at Stanford and the author of *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship With God* (2012)]

That column received 496 comments on the Times website. Here's one of them – I have *not* read them all:

Luhrmann got it right. As a Protestant pastor, I have come to believe that what we assert about God is of no real importance to that "being." What ultimately matters is how we live and what we do with our lives. Being in a religious community can be an enriching experience as well as a vehicle for service to those who are in need. We love God by caring for those less fortunate. That is what matters.

That was from a United Church of Christ minister, in a small town in rural Illinois. [Rev. Frank L. Hoss, Hope UCC, Armstrong, Illinois]

If we leave traditional theology behind, what are we left with? Is there room for God in our world view? Is there any point in keeping "God" as part of our vocabulary?

I won't pretend to know the answers to these questions, but what I would like to share with you now are seven aspects of what one might be inclined to call God, seven faces or masks of God, seven metaphors to save you from the horrors of atheism. [see Galen Guengerich, *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* (2013), pp. 69-70]

By the way, when I'm asked about my view of God, and if I'm not able to evade the question, I admit to being a quasi-mystical, post-humanist, metaphorical theist. That tends to be a question stopper. If the meaning of that term isn't clear on its face, you can ask me about it during coffee hour.

[1] The God of Mystery – a God who is the personification of mystery, or the metaphor for mystery – for the deepest mysteries – this God, the God of the first day in Genesis, as I see it, has the strongest claim to be called God. And, really by definition, this is a God about whom we can know the least, actually about whom we can know nothing at all.

Why is there something rather than nothing? Can we appeal to physics or astrophysics or cosmology? Will we ever have an explanation of why anything exists at all? And when I ask how we got to something from nothing, I mean nothing. No space, no time, no Higgs field, no laws of science in waiting. [On the discovery of the Higgs boson and related matters, see Brian Greene, “Mind Over Matter,” *Smithsonian*, July-Aug. 2013, p. 25.] No observer. How did we get from there to here? Or has there always been something? But what would explain that? Why is there a universe? What led to the Big Bang?

I don’t think the physicists will ever be able to answer these questions. I think we have permanent mystery here. You can call this, *God*, the God of Mystery. But calling this creative force God, of course, does not provide us an answer, just another question, where did God come from?

I did a whole sermon on this last spring, so let’s move on– [“Why is there something rather than nothing? – Ultimate question or pointless diversion?” (UUG, March 17, 2013)]

(pianist plays opening measures from Singing the Living Tradition #283, The Spacious Firmament on High)

[2] Moving on, to the God of Wonder – there is so much in our world that is wonderful – the wonders of nature, the wonders of human creativity. Let’s not take our world, with all its wonders, let’s not take it for granted. And let’s preserve our world of wonders for future generations.

The natural wonders are different from mysteries. Wonders, as I’m using the term, can be explained by science. Or if they can’t be explained today, we can be pretty sure that someday we’ll understand them. Darwin and his descendants, for example, have made the world of living things much more understandable than they were before. But the Grand Canyon is no less wonderful just because geologists have figured out how canyons are formed.

Here’s a wonder for you. You probably haven’t thought about how difficult it would be to be a dung beetle. Here’s the problem. You’ve rolled up your little ball of dung, and you want to save it for tomorrow’s lunch. But other dung beetles would find it much easier simply to take your dung ball than to go to the bother of assembling their own. Your solution is to roll your ball away on a straight line, getting as far away from potential predators as fast as possible. But how do you know that you’re going in a straight line, and not just wandering around. Our clever African dung beetle, *Scarabaeus satyrus*, uses the Milky Way as its guide. [New York Times, Aug. 6, 2013, p. D6]

We're surrounded by wonders. Let's pay attention to them.

(#25, *God of the Earth, the Sky, the Sea*)

[3] God as love. That should be a familiar idea. Indeed, love is basic in Unitarian Universalism. "Love is the doctrine of this church." That's the opening line of reading #471, in the back of the hymnal [*Singing the Living Tradition*].

With respect to love as God, or God as love, I could get sidetracked by the New Testament book of 1 John, which famously states, that "Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love." [1 John 4:8] More importantly, the writer goes on to say:

20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, they're liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they *have* seen, cannot love God, whom they have *not* seen.

21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. [1 John 4:20-21]

But I'll leave further exploration of this fascinating – and quite short – New Testament book to your individual Bible study [and see also Matthew 25:35-40 and 1 Corinthians 13:13] and ask two questions: First, what does it mean to say that God *loves* us? And, second, how do we go about demonstrating that *we* love God?

Galen Guengerich, in the passage I read earlier, would appear to dispatch the first question. A God who "modif[ies] the laws of nature willy-nilly," he says, is logically and morally unacceptable. [*God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age*, ch. 4, "What's Divine: The Experience of God"]

Consider, for example, the story of Jesus and Lazarus, from the Gospel of John [chapter 11]. Cutting to the essence of the story, Lazarus is dead, and Jesus brings him back to life. We can assume here that either Jesus is empowered by God or that Jesus *is* God, as well as a man. Why Lazarus? People die all the time – why single him out? Apparently he was a personal friend of Jesus. Not a very good reason. Moreover, Lazarus will die for good some day. Jesus won't keep intervening forever.

If God doesn't show God's love for us through miracles, or by answering prayers, then how? That's where *we* come in. We do what God cannot. We can't keep Lazarus, or anyone else, alive forever, but we can make the world a better place. We can strive to create a realm of peace and justice, what some would call the beloved community, or even the Kingdom of God.

The answer to my second question – how do we demonstrate our love for God? – is pretty much the same. The Illinois pastor I quoted earlier has it right: "We love God by caring for those less fortunate. That's what matters." We could state this more generally by saying that we show

our love for God by taking care of God's creation. I would put saving the world from global warming on the top of our list.

(Singing the Journey, #1048, Ubi Caritas)

[4] Number 4 on my short list is the God of Compassion – an aspect of the God of Love, perhaps, but worth separate attention. This is where Jesus comes in, for many people, where he legitimately comes in. While God – the traditional Father God – may seem too distant, too abstract, too committed to keeping the universe obedient to the laws of nature, and thus too busy to pay attention to the plight of individuals [see the Book of Job], Jesus – and the Holy Spirit, too, the Second and Third Persons of the Christian Trinity – they can feel available and concerned.

The God of Compassion – whether or not you think of this God as Jesus – this God won't change the world. This God won't mend your heart or cure your loved one's cancer or restore Grandma to life, but this God can hold you in a loving embrace. This God can make the pain more bearable. This God can understand your tears, can cry with you, and give you assurance that you can get through the dark valley and eventually feel again the warmth of the sun.

Or, in other situations, this God can help you say good-bye, help you adjust to the reality that the coming Christmas will probably be your last.

“How does this work?” you may ask. How can we rational, skeptical folks connect with such an unlikely God? Some of us may feel connected to such a God directly, but for others of us, this God needs help. Once again, God needs *our* help. If there is to be a balm for those who suffer in Gilead, or anywhere else, *we* must provide it. [see Jeremiah 8:22 and *Singing the Journey* #1045] We are God's hands, holding the hands of those who suffer. We are God's voice, singing lullabies to those too torn apart to sleep. We are God's ears, listening to stories of injury and injustice.

(#99 Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen)

I hope you all recognize the spiritual, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen.” In our hymnal – it's #99 – the second line is “nobody knows my sorrow.” In the version that lives in my *heart*, the second line is “nobody knows but Jesus.” Aren't you glad you weren't on the UU Hymnal Commission twenty years ago that had to make that choice: Jesus, in or out?

[5] This God of Compassion may be a little too soft and squishy for some of us, so let's turn quickly to the God of Principle. This God gave us the Ten Commandments and the assurance of the Declaration of Independence, that we're all created equal – all of us, no exceptions: Ariel Castro, the Cleveland kidnapper, and Fidel Castro, too. This God gave us Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative and John Rawls' Difference Principle [*A Theory of Justice* (1971)]. This God tells us that peace is better than war. This God warns us to respond to global warming.

Where do moral principles come from? We can cite instinct. Those who treat others well are more likely to survive and to leave descendants. We can cite the training that we receive at home, in school, and in church. We can cite our own experience. Guengerich's book, by the way, has some chapters on this.

And we assume that God, being God, is as moral as we are – indeed, we imagine, we hope, that God is a step ahead of us morally, and is leading us on, leading us on to a higher moral plane.

(#121 We'll Build a Land)

[6] I've reached now the sixth, the penultimate, face of God, the God of Rhetoric. This God is obviously related to the God of Principle, but the emphasis is different. The God of Principle is rational, mostly, while the God of Rhetoric is emotional.

Look at the coins or the currency in your pocket or purse. "In God we trust," they proclaim. Look again at the Declaration of Independence: We are endowed by our Creator – by God – "with certain unalienable rights: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Look at our Pledge to the Flag: "One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." (The old version still comes more naturally to me.) Look at the Scout Oath: "On my honor I will do my best, to do my duty to God and my country." The Boy Scout rhetoric gives shame to Boy Scout practice, I'm sorry to say. They've made a half step with respect to gays, leaving themselves in a logically and morally untenable position, but they haven't budged at all with respect to their belief-in-God requirement. [see NY Times, "Boy Scouts End Longtime Ban On Gay Youths," May 24, 2013, p. A1 and www.scouting.org. Gays are still banned from adult leadership positions, but for the kids, it's OK now. There has been no change in the official Boy Scout position with respect to God: you've got to believe, in Him. See their website.]

I'm sure some of you have been impatient and skeptical with respect to all of these excuses for God that I've given you – and this one, the God of Rhetoric, could be the worst of all. "Who needs it?" you might well ask.

By adding God to our statements we're saying that we mean them to be taken seriously; we've thought about them, and they're important. God adds weight to them.

By adding God to our mottos, we make it more likely – at least I hope so – that we will not only recognize it when we fall short, but that we will feel compelled to do something about it.

And there's no requirement that we all have the same idea of God. For some, the God of Rhetoric could be a very literal, personal God, a God who is the source of our moral principles, a God who gives us strength, strength as a nation and strength as individuals. For others, the use of God language might simply signal our continuity with past generations. Or we may accept the God language because we recognize that it's important for others, and it doesn't really hurt us.

(#281 O God Our Help in Ages Past)

[7] Two verses from the second chapter of Genesis:

2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it, God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. [Genesis 2:2-3]

On the seventh day God rested, so our seventh face of God, our seventh day of God, is the God of Rest.

“God wants you to sleep through the sermon.” How’s that for a statement that will wake everyone up? What I mean is, if God can take a break after six days of hard work, if God can stop and rest, so can we. And if the best place for a short nap is at church, during the sermon, do it. I’ve done it myself, as some of you have witnessed.

My plan was to go on from here with a discussion of how we might use this time of rest – reading the book or article that we haven’t found the time for, contemplating what has been meaningful in our lives and what could make the years to come more meaningful, planning our children’s lives for them, getting serious about meditation or yoga – but I won’t do it. I won’t go there.

Unstructured rest. Irresponsible rest. Spontaneous rest. Will it lead to better health or greater happiness? I don’t know. If it’s good enough for God, by God, it’s good enough for me. [see Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (1999) and Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (2005)]

There’s another side to the God of Rest. The ultimate rest, the rest which awaits us all. Dreamless sleep. The merging of our soul with God. Reunion with our ancestors and with the loved ones who have gone before us. Our one and only journey across the River Styx.

I hope, when it is our turn, that we can look back with satisfaction. I hope we can say, “I’ve had my chance, I did my best; it’s your turn now, it’s up to you.” I hope we can have confidence that memory of us and of our accomplishments will live on – for a while – and I hope we are willing to let go, to recognize that memories fade, records are lost, that eventually the last trace of us will be gone. I hope we can say, “it’s OK.”

(3-fold amen, Hymns of the Spirit #544)

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There you have it – seven ways to understand God, or to imagine God, seven metaphors, seven faces or modes or images or masks of God, God’s seven days of the week: mystery,

wonder, love, compassion, principle, rhetoric, and rest. Take your pick. There could be others; I'll leave them to your imagination. Or there's always another choice: none of the above.