

God.

One of the most – of not THE most - complicated words in the English language. And certainly one of the most fraught and complicated concepts in human history.

There was a time... not that long ago, when the mention of God from a UU pulpit could get a minister in hot water. Oh, maybe not everywhere, but at the height of our humanist arc, the word God was extremely suspect.

That's because Unitarian Universalism grew out of a monotheistic Christianity that saw God as Father, as the ultimate authority, the source of all being, and of all true meaning.

A patriarchal religion in service to a patriarchal social order, a hierarchy that put God at the top, then the angels, then demons (fallen angels), then men, then women, children, the beasts, the plants, and at the very bottom was inanimate matter.

Each of those categories could be divided further. Gold was a higher form of inanimate matter than dirt, for instance. Kings and princes, queens and duchesses, were higher in what is called the Great Chain of Being than common men and women. And of course, slaves, animals, plants, and inanimate matter were subject to higher authority.

All very convenient if you were at the top, because questioning from below was forbidden and actively rooted out.

The Enlightenment tried to put an end to that – and succeeded in many places. The strict form of it is now more or less relegated to minority status.

But that hierarchy it is still deeply embedded in our cultural DNA, and softer forms of it are all around us.

This kind of God evokes so much for so many, most of it not very pleasant. UU congregations are filled with refugees from dogmatic – and sometimes abusive – religious upbringings.

This God has always struck me as rather a one note God. Or perhaps a simple tune, played out on the bodies of humans and animals and the earth. And if you didn't like the tune, why it was simply played louder, and harder.

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*I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do because I notice it always coincides with their own desires. - Susan B. Anthony*

*Oppressed and oppressors cannot possibly mean the same thing when they speak of God. The God of the oppressed is a God of revolution who breaks the chains of slavery. The oppressors' God is a God of slavery and must be destroyed along with the oppressors. - James Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation*

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Ideas about God, the Divine, and reality are as complicated and as varied as human beings and their experience and their psychology.

Given that multiplicity, let's explore some of that variety.

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We can map that territory in a few ways.

Let's leave the word God behind for a moment, and talk about the Divine instead, the un-nameable power that seems present everywhere. We call it the Spirit of Life. It is called other names, none of which ever adequately describe it. They are merely useful signifiers, not to be confused with the real thing.

We could map the Divine along two axis.

Let call one of them the TI axis. The transcendent vs immanent. The Divine outside it all and the Divine inside it all.

The other is the axis of singularity vs multiplicity. The One and the Many.

The singular transcendent is monotheism – the one all-powerful omniscient god that created the world, is outside of the world, and intervenes in the world. We typically think of the Abrahamic religions when we think of monotheism. In Deism, that god is seen as the First Cause, ultimately responsible for the creation of the universe, but who does not interfere. Deism was the philosophical stance of many of the founders of the American republic – many of whom were also Unitarians.

The transcendent many gives us polytheism, with pantheons of deities. The most familiar example of this comes to us from Greek mythology, with all its gods and goddesses and messy family dynamics.

The singular immanent gives us pantheism - the belief that reality is identical with divinity, or that all-things compose an all-encompassing, immanent god. Pantheist belief usually does not recognize a distinct personal anthropomorphic god, only a sort of unity from which all things arise and which we are part of.

The immanent many gives us a polytheistic sort of pantheism – that there are many gods and goddesses, or spirits of land and place and time, part of the world around us, and who inhabit reality along with us.

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I realize all this is a very basic framing, but it lays the ground for the next ways we understand this territory.

I think these ways are all equally important. I guess we could call them binaries, even though their boundaries are sometimes fuzzy.

There is the personal – impersonal binary. Do we have a personal relationship with the One God and vice-versa? A personal relationship with multiple deities – and vice-versa? With the

spirits of a place? Do we – like the Deists – choose to have a mutually impersonal relationship with the One?

There is the dead – alive binary. Do we inhabit a reality that is not Divine? A reality essentially composed of dead matter undergoing a series of complicated physical reactions? Or is it shot through with Divinity? Is the very fabric of reality alive – either as the Flesh of God, or as a community of beings who are all rightfully sacred? Are some parts alive, and other parts not?

There is the hierarchy – heterarchy binary. In a hierarchy, authority comes from rank in the order of things. Heterarchy is a form of organization resembling a network or fishnet. Authority is determined by knowledge and function. Chains vs webs. The voice from on high, vs a conversation.

There is the theist - nontheist binary, which places a number of belief systems off the god grid, so to speak. Reality simply is, without attributing any agency or causality to it. The non-theist position is not what we call atheism, by the way.

By way of illustration, I am reminded of a story about the Buddha, who, when asked about the existence of a Supreme Being, said, “When you are trapped in a burning house, does it matter how it was built?”

There are other fuzzy binaries, and we can endlessly complicate this, but we can see how a simple framing and few variables generate familiar patterns of religions and spiritual paths.

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You’ll notice that these patterns are mostly about relationships. How we as human beings relate to reality, both seen and unseen. And perhaps more importantly, how we relate to each other.

We know that we can't disconnect our ideas about the Divine and reality from our social, political, and economic systems. Religions are deeply intertwined in these systems, and they can moderate or intensify human vices and virtues.

I have seen each of these patterns turn out perfectly lovely human beings, while at the same time acting as sources of abuse or oppression.

And having said that, I think that some of these patterns promote better relationships and better outcomes than others. That's called a bias. And I unashamedly come down in the heterarchy of aliveness, in the immanent many corner.

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DAVID ABRAM

*If we speak of matter as essentially inanimate, or inert, we establish the need for a graded hierarchy of beings: stones have no agency or experience whatsoever; bacteria have a minimal degree of life; plants have a bit more life, with a rudimentary degree of sensitivity; 'lower' animals are more sentient, yet still stuck in their instincts; 'higher' animals are more aware; while humans alone are really awake and intelligent. In this manner we continually isolate human awareness above, and apart from, the sensuous world. It takes us out of relationship with the things around us. If, however, we assume that matter is alive and self-organizing from the get-go, then hierarchies vanish, and we are left with a wildly differentiated field of animate beings, each of which has its gifts relative to the others. And we find ourselves not above, but in the very midst of this web, our own sentience part and parcel of the sensuous landscape.*

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Unitarian Universalism invites us to consider that all of these ways of relating to reality – however we choose to frame them – each hold a piece of the truth. That we are free to choose the way or ways that work for us as individuals. That they are not mutually exclusive – that they can sometimes be paradoxical and contradictory – and all have a place.

It invites us to move freely in this multidimensional arena of the Divine, whatever form it takes, by whatever name we call it. Perhaps we feel like praying to the One God this morning, and conversing with the trees this afternoon, and making offerings to the local water deities by the light of the moon.

We are allowed to be complicated, with many layers and roots and branches.

We are invited – almost required – to embrace complexity and ambiguity. Of identities, of voices, of perspectives, of beliefs, of practice. For us, real danger lies in exclusive truth claims, and imposing them on others.

We have seen what happens when people do that. History backs us up.

But whatever we choose – and we do have all those choices - we must be willing to be transformed by our encounters with the One and the Many. That whatever we choose, it must lead us into right relationship with others.

This is the essence of Unitarian Universalism, and why we are a covenantal faith.

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My invitation to you is to explore the field of the Divine. Or maybe wander about in it is a better choice of words. And while you are wandering about, try to invoke these different patterns of relationship.

I use the word invoke quite deliberately, because how we choose to relate to others and the world around us is something we have the power to do, and those choices have consequences.

Invoking some of these patterns will be more comfortable than others. Some will feel quite awkward. Some will be easier to invoke, others more difficult. Some will feel familiar, others a bit alien.

If you are comfortable doing so, try invoking the Divine as a great power outside and above you. See yourself in the hierarchy. Where are you? How does that make you feel?

Invoke the Divine as great power that is within you and around you. See yourself as connected in a vast web of being.

Try those two together. Can they both be present at the same time?

Try seeing the world as dead matter. What does that do?

Try, as David Abram suggests, to see matter as alive and self-organizing. Establish a personal relationship with the beings near you. Have a conversation with them. What do they say?

Observe how each of these patterns shifts the way you relate to others and the world around you.

How will that affect your choices going forward?

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I find this practice to be both incredibly empowering, and incredibly humbling. I think it makes me a better human being, and a better UU.

I hope you will too.