

# UU Views of God

*Edited by Paul Rasor*

Many people have questioned whether any concept of God can be meaningful in a modern, scientific world. Others, however, find the idea of God to be profoundly meaningful. Among Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberals, conceptions range across a wide spectrum. Some reject God altogether and hold a strictly atheistic view of the universe. Others may use the term God to convey very different ideas, such as the creative power of evolution in the universe, or the power that makes transformation possible in our lives, or the ongoing power of love, or simply the ultimate mystery within which we all must live. And while few UUs think of God as a supernatural being, many understand themselves to be in some sort of personal relationship with God, however conceived. Many also stress the feminine aspects of the divine by invoking Goddess imagery and using metaphors such as mother or sister in place of traditional metaphors for God such as father or lord.

Theologians remind us that the symbol "God" can serve several important functions. First, it offers a vision of the highest values of truth, justice, love, and goodness toward which we strive. In this sense, it serves as a standard against which to measure ourselves and our achievements. Second, the concept of God can remind us of the relativity and limitations of our own ideas. Here, it serves as a corrective to our biases and a basis for critical reflection. Finally, by bringing together our highest ideals in a single symbol, the idea of God provides a focus for personal devotion or communal worship. These are among the many reasons why God continues to be an important and meaningful symbol for many Unitarian Universalists today.

—Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, Editor

## **Life Force**

As a young child I thought of God as a magical, all-powerful being who was responsible for everything that happened, good or bad. Later in childhood I began to feel I had a cause-and-effect relationship to God, gaining some control over good and bad results by how I prayed, petitioned, and behaved. Then in my teenage years God became personalized for me as the ideal parent, unconditionally accepting and loving. By the time I was in my twenties, God had become an impersonal force or energy in the universe. I still resonate most closely with William Wordsworth's way of describing God in "Tintern Abbey": "A sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man: a motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things."

Yet, in my fifties I've also begun to pray to God as a person again, especially in times of great need and great joy. I do that even as I know God intellectually as an impersonal life force. So I live in paradox and ambiguity with God now, often simply feeling overcome with awe as spirit fills me from some source far beyond my own conscious control.

—Rev. Scotty McLennan  
Director of Religious Services  
Stanford University, Stanford, CA.

### **Mystery**

My faith is pretty simple and rock solid. It feeds my soul, is the source of my joy, and colors all that I do. I experience God as love, light, power, and wisdom. The God I pray to is both transcendent and immanent, a part of me but also greater than me. Sometimes I experience God as a light that comes to me in the darkness. This light emanates intense love and compassion and leaves me feeling joyous and connected to all of creation. Other times, I simply "hear" God's guidance. It seems similar to a nudge or sometimes a whisper. This guidance usually comes suddenly and clearly, and it can arrive while I am deep in prayer or simply going about my business of the day, such as when I'm doing the dishes.

I am usually shy about sharing my experiences of God because I can't explain God in an intellectual manner. I experience the Sacred through my heart and when I try to define "it" with words, the words always fall short of my experience. Such is the Mystery! I consider myself to be both a Unitarian Universalist and a Christian mystic.

—Kate Lore  
Social Justice Director  
First Unitarian Church  
Portland, OR

### **The Web of Existence**

Long before I knew anything about physics, I sensed that life is woven together by invisible threads of being, that the earth and all that lies beyond it emanate not from one source but from a complex web of existence and energy that spans time and space. And while I believe that there are conscious connections and interdependent relationships within this great web of existence, I do not use the word God or Goddess to describe it.

The universe that I experience has no moral aspect. There is no underlying plan or message to be discerned. Giving intentionality to life is a human tendency. The beauty and excitement of being human is that we have infinite opportunities to make our own meaning.

This reality forces me to share viscerally in the full range of the Earth's joy and suffering. It requires that I work for justice and the transformation of all that would marginalize or oppress. Being part of a conscious universe with no moral first cause means that each moment profoundly matters. Everything that I do, say, think, or feel relates to everything

else and may have consequence and meaning beyond my comprehension. In the midst of this I am in perpetual awe of the power of such a universe.

—Rev. Kathy Huff  
Associate Minister  
First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church  
Arlington, MA

### **The Biblical God**

The core of my Unitarian Universalism is my belief that no theology is universal. I believe that theology is more akin to autobiography than to rational speculation. My own Christian upbringing is probably the biggest reason I now call myself a Unitarian Universalist Christian.

As a chaplain serving poor, often mentally ill and/or addicted people, I have found that any understanding of God that could really ground and sustain me would have to be equally accessible to the people I work with. For me, a recovering addict working in a treatment center for mostly poor and many minority clients, the story of struggle, sin, and redemption found in the Bible is key. As a literal story the tale of Jesus' resurrection is hard to sustain, but as a metaphor that illustrates that there is life beyond the death of addiction, despair, and total loss, it's hard to beat.

My ideas about God have even evolved into something vaguely trinitarian. I believe we experience God on several different planes simultaneously: as the transcendent, mysterious other; as the force of life and inspiration within ourselves; and in the faces of other people, both our friends and our enemies.

—Rev. Lisa Schwartz  
Chaplain  
Substance Abuse Recovery Programs  
Topeka, KS

### **Community**

It has been years since I have used the word God to explain anything about the world in which we live. The issue of evil and suffering prevents me from finding any comfort in this term. This is especially true when I consider the history and current needs of my own community—the African American community. The idea of God has had a mixed record at best with respect to the African American struggle for liberation. In my experience, it has often justified suffering by seeing it as redemptive instead of encouraging a strong, consistent fight against injustice. I see no merit in this. I believe the tradition of African American humanism points to the human potential for progressive activity, without any need of God talk.

Mine is a firm atheism that avoids talk of transcendence. From my perspective, there is nothing behind the symbol God. In its place, I affirm the idea of community. It is in

community that we are encouraged to develop our full human potential and overcome oppression.

—Anthony B. Pinn  
Associate Professor, Religious Studies  
Macalester College  
St. Paul, MN

### **Love**

For twenty years I have followed the practice of Ignatian contemplative prayer while ministering in a variety of settings in inner-city communities. This path is one of activist spirituality. We deepen our experience of God through spiritual direction and prayer; we come to know that which is beyond our explanations, but which is always Love. From the knowing, and from the mutuality of the experience of Love, we are called to be co-creators of the reign of God on earth.

God is in the nitty gritty work of loving one another in the social, economic, political, and material world. We are called to understand the world's systems and its evils and to establish mutual love in spite of all our unlovability. At the same time, through attention to prayer we discover God, who beckons us to know Mystery in life; we discover a Love without beginning or end in which we live, which lives in us, and which offers us unimaginable joy beyond our expectations.

—Rev. Elizabeth K. Ellis Senior Minister and Executive Director  
Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry  
Boston, MA.

### **Relationship**

When I was young, I believed in a personal God—a person who, though invisible, would probably look like one of Michaelangelo's paintings. As I grew older, I came to believe in an impersonal God—a force like gravity, or love, or life itself. This later belief satisfied my mind for some time.

Yet what was missing from this understanding of God, for me, was the quality of relationship—the actual experience of a relationship with God, which I had known as a child, and which, in my honest moments, I knew still even though it no longer made sense. After much wrestling, I now believe in a personal God who is not a person, who is a Mystery beyond my ability to comprehend, yet no less real for my confusion. This God is wholly Other, yet also "as close as my own breath." St. Augustine wrote, "If you can understand it, it's not God." I cannot say what God is, though I know in my soul that God is. God is known by many names, yet is not fully known by any name. Even so, God can be known and loved, and God loves us all.

—Rev. Erik Walker Wikstrom  
Parish Minister

First Universalist Church  
Yarmouth, ME

### **Recommended Reading**

- Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, reprint ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.
- Borg, Marcus J. *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*, reprint ed. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1998.
- Kaufman, Gordon D. *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Kushner, Harold. *Who Needs God*. New York: Pocket Books, 2000.
- McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Miles, Jack. *God: A Biography*, reprint ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.