

UU Views of God

Among Unitarian Universalists, conceptions of the divine range across a wide spectrum. Some hold a strictly atheistic view of the universe. Others may use the term *God* to convey something other than a conscious being with intention, such as the creative power of evolution in the universe, the power that makes transformation possible in our lives, the abiding power of love, or the ultimate mystery within which we all must live. Many understand themselves to be in some sort of personal relationship with God, however conceived. Many stress the feminist aspects of the divine by invoking Goddess imagery.

Whether you believe in a concept you call God or not, whatever you think God may be, even if you're not sure what you believe about God, your beliefs, questions, and doubts are welcome among us. Unitarian Universalists revel in mystery. Being in the presence of others who believe differently can help us examine our own beliefs, articulate them, give them new shape, and deepen and strengthen them over time. Collectively, Unitarian Universalists worship gives reverence to our highest ideals, whether embodied for you as God, Spirit of Life, Mother, Love, or any other name.

—Rev. Paul Razor, Editor

God is a word, a word for the ways everything and everyone across all time and space is connected and the same, and yet always changing and growing, and so is not just the same but also more diverse than we can even comprehend. God is what is becoming and God is becoming itself, the impulse of transformation, and the transformation. God is the call to be awake to suffering, and the courage that comes from the heart being broken wide open. God is the deep knowing of how precious your life is, and yet how little life is actually *about* you.

Our God-talk is our best attempt to name life in the widest possible sense, to give voice to the knowing/unknowing at our core. But in the end, we realize, words are not enough. Call it what you will, the feeling is what matters, the experience, the reality, the grace. Seek that. Praise that. Give thanks for that. All the rest is guess work.

—Rev. Gretchen Haley,
Foothills Unitarian Church,
Fort Collins, CO

An entirely chance convergence of literature, conversations, and rumination in my early teens led to my non-belief in any form of personified, unifying, or consecrated higher power. But I am not frightened by the all-powerful indetermindism of life. Everything we know defies the unstoppable power of oblivion. Each of us is a flash of light that might not have happened, composed of leftover stardust. This is science, and it's still the holiest thing there is. We beat the odds to rise from the ashes of billions of magnificent lights, and we are called to burn just as brightly. We must commit to explore the outermost limits of our split-second existence. I want to use every moment of my limited allotment of time on Earth efficiently, meaningfully, compassionately, and humbly—purely in pursuit of the best possible existence for myself and those around me. I can sculpt this little taste of sentience into a rapturous, passionate odyssey of my own volition. I don't need a concept of God to call me to my best self.

—Sofia Avery-Kapulski,

Unitarian Universalist Congregation
of Santa Fe, NM

I first started referring to The Goddess as a political statement; it was a matter of principle for me as a feminist. However, over time, the Goddess has become an intimate and felt sense of the Spirit.

I find the Goddess everywhere: when I cast a circle, when I walk a labyrinth, when I am intimate with a lover. She wears the face of my *abuelas*, my *tías*, my mother, my daughters: the women in my family on whose shoulders I stand and the girls I am raising to become strong and powerful women. My sense of Her is that she is both immanent and transcendent, a part of me and something much bigger than me, both.

I am at my best when I remember that I am Her handmaiden in the work of bringing joy and social justice to the world. Whether I am traversing a dark night of my soul or at the height of self-expression and joy and service, I am profoundly grateful to know myself her daughter, always loved and cherished. *Bendita Sea*, Blessed Be.

—Julica Hermann de la Fuente, seminarian, Meadville Lombard
Theological School

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. Yet, in my fifties I began 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,
retired Director of Religious Services, Stanford University, CA

As a teenager, I found myself rejecting the idea of God, whose judgment I had always been taught to fear. Unfortunately, being an atheist Muslim isn't the easiest theological option, and I struggled to find my spiritual balance. I let go of God and Islam. My journey since has brought me back to new understandings of both. I realized that, for me, God is not so much about what I believe. God is about what and how I serve. God is a reminder that, because I am connected to something so powerful, I have great potential but am also beautifully limited in achieving it on my own. In Islam, there is the concept of *taqwa*, or "mindfulness of God," and the best people are "those who have great *taqwa*." We achieve great *taqwa* by persistently trying to embody our gratitude, putting it into action by serving as agents of this creative and sustaining power. Understanding God in this way has committed me to a new kind of spiritual balance, grounded in humility and possibility.

—Ranwa Hammamy,
ministerial candidate, Oakland, CA

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

Yet what was missing from this understanding of God, for me, was 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 to me. After much wrestling, I now believe in a personal God who is not a person, who 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, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church,
Charlottesville, VA

My mother is a scientist. She taught me that the holy is present in our material world—in the miracle of life that came out of darkness, in the complexity of evolution, and in the intricacies of how we and all living things are made and change and die. I experience God when I’m surrounded by the sound of voices raised in song or when, by grace that I don’t know the source of, justice rains down on this unjust world or healing comes to the broken. I see my ancestors as part of God. I light incense to honor them and remember all who have gone before, who have made this path by walking it. I guess I call myself a reverent humanist, raised Unitarian Universalist, a lover of life who believes in a great abiding Love that casts no one out.

—Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen,
Leadership Development Associate for Youth and Young Adults of Color, Unitarian Universalist
Association, Boston, MA

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For Further Reading

Karen Armstrong. *The Case for God* (Alfred A. Knopf)

Marcus J. Borg. *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (Harper San Francisco)

Gordon D. Kaufman. *In the Beginning . . . Creativity* (Fortress)

Harold Kushner. *Who Needs God* (Pocket)

Sallie McFague. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Fortress)

Jack Miles. *God: A Biography* (Vintage)

Paul Rasor. *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century*. (Skinner House)