

THEISM IS DEAD: LONG LIVE GOD!
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*You told me once you believed in God.
The old man waved his hand. Maybe, he said. I got no
Reason to think he believes in me. Oh, I'd like to
See him for a minute if I could.
What would you say to him?
Well, I think I'd just tell him. I'd say:
Wait a minute. Wait just one minute before you
Start in on me. Before you say anything, there's
Just one thing I'd like to know.
And he'll say: What's that?
And then I'm goin to ast him: What did you have
Me in that crapgame down there for anyway?
I couldn't put any part of it together.
Suttree smiled. What do you think he'll say?
The ragpicker spat and wiped his mouth.
I don't believe he can answer it, he said.
I don't believe there is an answer.*

That brief passage from Cormac McCarthy's novel, *Suttree*, captures nearly everything I hope to say in this sermon. His crusty and unlettered ragpicker is an excellent candidate to represent the every-man and every-woman who can no longer hold hands with an anthropomorphic Imaginary Friend. Level-headed, clear-eyed and possessing a sense of being tricked, he dares commit the ultimate of sins by rendering useless – if not dead – the supernatural God of orthodoxy.

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The primary point I hope to make in this sermon is this: the time has come to bury the Great Puppeteer, the hero of the hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy”, who knows everything, lives everywhere and calls all the shots; the one that Nietzsche’s madman declared dead some one hundred years ago; the one that is credited for touchdowns and grand slams, praised on our dollar bills (arguably our most cherished religious icon) and blamed for tornadoes in our insurance policies.

In the next few minutes I’ll try to make the case that what reason and science have been unable to destroy – namely, the fickle, child-murdering God of orthodox Christianity – collateral damage surely should. I’m talking about the collateral damage brought about by belief in a God that denounces birth control, fueling the epidemic fires in AIDS-ravaged Africa. I’m talking about the collateral damage brought about by belief in a God who hates homosexuals, providing a rationale for second-class citizenship the like of which has not been seen in this nation since the Jim Crow South. I’m talking about the collateral damage that inspires young men to become suicide bombers in a God-directed “holy war”, pawns in an undeclared religious crusade. I’m talking about the legions of diabolical consequences for organizing our lives and governments around faith in a God who is, as Dylan put it, on our side. In short, I mean to suggest that belief in a supernatural deity is far too costly to maintain.

Let’s begin with what scholar, writer and retired Episcopal bishop, John Shelby Spong, describes as a quick history of the orthodox God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Born at the moment that human beings became self-conscious and aware they were not in control of critical factors such as weather, seasons, illness, aging

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and death (especially death), deities were created to explain human powerlessness and reduce anxiety. In order to be trustworthy, gods and goddesses were endowed with powers not unlike divine superheroes.

While the pantheon of deities served the needs of some tribes, others began to cast the divine in singular terms, most prominent among them were the people who came to be known as the Hebrews. Keeping in mind that deities were likely created to address human powerlessness and the resulting anxiety, the Hebrew God played the part of a divine super-parent and commander-in-chief. He created a covenant with his chosen people, and then led them in battle against their foes. Sure, the Hebrew God had some built-in drawbacks – he could be manipulated with sacrifices, pleas and fasting, he required humans to be helpless children before him and sent natural disasters their way if they sinned too often – but, a deity that is willing to kill your enemies for the sake of *your* tribe can't be all bad, right?

Spong's point is that the monotheistic God was created – in a time when people were convinced that the stars were actual peepholes through which God could watch them at night – to address not just their fears, but also their *sense of being small, flawed, unworthy, sinful*. In other words, the God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is rooted in the ancient world-view of a marginalized, semi-nomadic tribe. Little wonder that this God mirrors the tribe's rules about everything from dietary laws to women's menstrual cycles. Little wonder that this God is willing to slay tens of thousands of the tribe's enemies. And little wonder that the Hebrew's God embraced

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them as his chosen people, willing to suspend the laws of nature in order to protect them, and them alone, even reserving a place for them in the afterlife.

With Bishop Spong, I submit that what he calls the “God experience” of today’s theistic traditions has been bankrupted by reason, science and human experience. Those who insist on the concrete, absolute existence of a theistic God that is eerily similar to themselves expect the rest of us to suspend all rationality and adopt their time-bound deity before he pours out his wrath on us, thus supplanting rational religion with fantasy and fear. How is it that otherwise modern human beings – people who drive nearly space-age cars, talk on cell phones and avail themselves to state-of-the-art medicine – base their lives on the notion of a tribal deity invented centuries ago? Furthermore, how is it that challenging that idea of God is still such a radical thing to do?

I want to introduce into this discussion another thinker and writer, Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. Harris poses a question that is entirely reasonable, yet sure to get one into hot water in mainstream America. He asks, if today were the first day of human consciousness, does anyone truly believe that we’d be debating, to the exclusion of a number of important issues, the validity of Creationism? Of course not!

But before we add Harris’ voice to the mix, let me pause to revisit my main point. Our notions of God evolved from the urge to explain what human beings could neither understand nor control. The monotheistic, supernatural God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam cannot be understood apart from his tribal roots in ancient Hebrew culture.

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And, lastly, I'm suggesting that in an age in which religious fundamentalism and politics – both domestic and foreign – are becoming more closely aligned, the theistic God is not worth keeping.

I'll suggest that there is a way to think of God that is both rational and useful before I end, but first I'd like to reflect on another rather scathing thesis from Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*, namely, the role of religious *moderates* in times like these. I'll tell you in advance that he is only marginally more critical of radical religious conservatives than religious moderates.

Perhaps you've heard the old quip, credited to the Marine Corps, to lead, follow or get out of the way. Amidst the hand wringing and soul searching so evident amongst religious liberals, Harris tells those who call for universal respect of all religions to consider what they're tacitly tolerating, then lead, follow or get out of the way.

From his recent book, *The End of Faith*:

Moderates do not want to kill anyone in the name of God, but they want us to keep using the word "God" as if we know what we are talking about. And they do not want anything too critical said about people who really believe in the God of their fathers, because tolerance, perhaps above all else, is sacred. To speak plainly and truthfully about the state of our world – to say, for instance, that the Bible and Koran both contain mountains of life-destroying gibberish – is antithetical to tolerance as moderates currently conceive it. But we can no longer afford the luxury of such

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political correctness. We must finally recognize the price we are paying to maintain the iconography of our ignorance.

Harris believes that we should be well rid of all scripture and any use of the word “God”. Furthermore, he indicts those of us who would turn a blind eye to the theistic, supernatural God under the banner of tolerance. But are there no alternatives available save theism and atheism – flip sides of the same coin of absolute certainty? Is it ever possible to use theological language without the collateral damage I mentioned earlier? And, perhaps more important for some, does the death of the theistic God require the death of religion?

First things first. Let’s be clear as to which God both Spong and Harris declare as dead. Allen Brill, a Lutheran pastor (ELCA) and contributor to the *Progressive Populist*, used his March 1, 2005 column to call for the burial of a God not unlike the one I’ve been describing.

He writes: *[This God] persists in existing to incite us to violence, confuse us about our sexuality, promise what [he] cannot deliver and excuse us from a lack of concern for our fellow humans. Whether it takes a wooden stake or silver bullet, we must find a way to intern [this God] so that [he] haunts us no longer.*

Let’s bury God-the Commander-in-Chief. It was bad enough in ancient times when the conception of God as a Divine Warrior incited the slaughter of innocents with swords of bronze, but in an age when a few fanatics can kill millions, we really must discard the notion that “our god is bigger than their god.”

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Let's bury God the Prude. Some theists make us wonder why the Creator ever made us sexual beings if so much of sexual activity is God-displeasing. All of it can't be blamed on the Bible, either. Even the priestly writers that jotted down the laws against adultery, incest and male homosexual acts expended far more words advocating the elimination of economic inequality. Paul made a few negative comments about homosexuality but he devoted his ministry to reaching out to those who had previously been judged as unfit to be part of God's community. Let's close the casket lid on the sex-obsessed God who abhors the degradation, exploitation or oppression of human beings by any means.

Let's bury God the Fairy Godmother. In churches in our poorest neighborhoods and in many parts of the [Developing] World, hucksters preach a "prosperity gospel" of health and wealth to people desperate for more of both. This God can scarcely be found in any ancient scriptures, for those writings would never have been preserved through the centuries had they claimed such obvious fraud. "Have enough faith," those preachers say – and they mean "trust in me enough to give me your last dime and you'll be healed of AIDS. You'll be driving a new car."

Let's bury God the "Get Out of Jail Free" Card. Nearly 500 years ago the western Christian church was in thrall to God the Accountant. He tallied the indulgences and the masses, then calculated what each soul deserved...Head up to the altar, repeat the magic formula and receive your free pass to heaven. There is no cost to discipleship, only reward. There is no need to be concerned with your neighbor as long as you're "born again." Let's burn God the "Get Out of Jail Free" Card and

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respond instead to the God who calls us to be salt and light in this world as we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick and visit the prisoners.

I say again that this is still strong and unwelcome stuff in many quarters, this death notice for the theistic God. Those of us who have been Unitarian Universalists for some length of time may have forgotten how difficult it can be to unplug the various life support systems that keep theism alive on the *personal* level. It can take years to come to the conclusion that the God of popular culture must die – years that for many are marked with struggle and confusion and fear. (As one who has journeyed from Christian fundamentalism to liberal religion, let me assure you that the theistic God of my past has died a thousand little deaths before writing this sermon.) So lest we treat the death of theism as a purely intellectual exercise, let's pause to remember that the heart is in play here, too. Permit me to change direction just long enough to include this excerpt from James Kavanaugh's poem, "My Easy God Is Gone":

I have lost my easy God – the one whose name I knew since childhood.

I knew his temper, his sullen outrage, his ritual forgiveness.

...He was a good God – so he told me – a longsuffering and manageable one.

I knelt at his feet and kissed them.

I felt the smooth countenance of his forgiveness.

I never told him how he frightened me, how he followed me as a child...

He was a predictable God, I was the unpredictable one.

He was unchanging, omnipotent, all-seeing. I was volatile and helpless.

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*He taught me to thank him for the concern which gave me no chance to breathe,
For the love which demanded only love in return – and obedience.
He made pain sensible and patience possible and the future foreseeable.
He, the mysterious, took all mystery away, corroded my imagination,
Controlled the stars and would not let them speak for themselves.*

*Now he haunts me seldom: some fierce umbilical is broken.
I live with my own fragile hopes and sudden rising despair.*

*Now I do not weep for my sins; I have learned to love them and to know
That they are the wounds that make love real...
His maxims memorized in my boyhood do not make
Fruitless and pointless my experience.
I walk alone, but no so terrified as when he held my hand.*

*Now he is gone, my easy, stuffy God...
Now the world is mine with all its pain and warmth, with its every color and sound;
The setting sun is my priest with the ocean for its altar.
The rising sun redeems me with the rolling waves warmed in its arms.*

*...I sense the call of creation, I feel it swelling up in my hands.
I can lust and love, eat and drink, sleep and rise,
But my easy God is gone – and in his stead, the mystery of loneliness and love!*

Kavanaugh's poem captures something of what it is to wrench ourselves free from the theistic God, only to find out that we are even more responsible for these lives of ours. We ought to honor that struggle. We ought to be known as a place where folks can find support and solace in what is often a genuine grief period. But, returning again to John Spong's lectures, we may find that amidst the struggle and grief, a new God is rising to replace the old one.

Time requires that I be brief, so I'm going to be succinct as I make the case for an understanding of God that can withstand the twin rigors of reason and utility. Spong states that the patient, God, needs an operation. The question is, will the patient survive the operation? Spong gives a qualified yes, so long as we shift our thinking to *descriptions of the God experience* and away from theism. In other words, God language is credible when understood as a human response to ultimate mystery.

Spong makes the case for this God by citing biblical examples and passages that point toward God-As-Mystery:

- The Hebrews devised a word for God (YHWH) that was unpronounceable, thus acknowledging that the holy is too mystical for explanation
- The Second Commandment was not an arbitrary inclusion; idolatry included any attempt to capture God in an image
- When Moses meets God on Mt. Sinai, the tablet is given but Moses catches only a short glimpse of God – one without shape or form
- Through much of ancient Israel's history, the Hebrew words for wind and God were treated as synonyms – something experienced but not seen

- The famous passage in John, “God is love”, may be taken at face value

On the other side of the theistic God is an understanding of God that is not rooted in a *definition* – the God we sing of in “Holy, Holy, Holy”. This God is the one embodied in our response to the offering, “Spirit of Life”. This is the God that is manifested when we live our lives fully, for, as Bishop Spong suggests, *God really is love*, then we are called to love wastefully. Without fear. Without counting the cost.

This is even the God of salvation, the one that causes us to love so deeply that we transcend our survival instinct and self-centeredness. This is the God that is utterly interchangeable with our highest concepts of what it is to be fully engaged with life and living. This is the God that is experienced as the winds that blow through our lives, calling us to be better persons today than we were yesterday. This is the God that does not rest on misappropriated scripture, secondhand stories or supernatural tales from another era. Jack Spong reminds us that this is the God that Jesus had in mind when his disciples asked him why he had come. Was it to found a new religion? Was it to set Israel on the right moral path? Was it to overthrow the Romans? No, was his reply. He had come to offer life, abundant life.

Folks, our challenge is to proclaim and live a religion that is credible when placed up against reason. In response to that challenge, some of us have abandoned all use of “God talk”, and who can blame us? Perhaps others of us need to be awakened to our role as enablers for those who take advantage of our well-intentioned tolerance. But for others, there is a valid theological option at our disposal should we risk going

deeper in our thinking about God. Refusing to surrender some of the most potent of all language in the Western world, some of us are heartened by the promise of a God experience that does not violate our intellects yet stirs our souls.

Theism is dead. Long live God – the God of enthusiasm, consolation, creativity, surprise, solidarity and awe. Long live God, indeed!

A final poem, this one from the fifteenth-century Indian saint, Kabir:

Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive. Jump into the experience while you are alive!...What you call “salvation” belongs to the time before death...The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic just because the body is rotten – that is all fantasy. What is found now is found then. If you find nothing now, you will simply end up with an apartment in the City of Death. If you make love with the divine now, in the next life you will have the face of satisfied desire.