

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage
Unitarian Universalist
Theology and Spirituality

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Two Paths

Two religious innovations have had influence far beyond their origins and down through two-and-a-half millennia until now. There are the mystical religions originating in India and the prophetic religions originating in the Middle East. Both were reactions to cultic religions which emphasized participation in rituals and sacrifices. Both stressed an inner, individual component of religion that cultic religion lacked.

Mystical religion originated in the *Upanishads*, or at least was first recorded there. Mystical religion promoted the experience of unity, the Oneness of the Universe, Brahman, manifest in all things, sustaining all things, transcending all things, beyond human thought, beyond human emotions. The disciplines of yoga illuminate an inner world and our innermost nature, Atman. In enlightenment one discerns that Brahman and Atman are one.

The prophetic religions have resulted from vocations, callings by Yahweh (God, Allah) to preach his word to his people. Whereas the mystical religions emphasize personal experience by those who seek it, the prophetic religions are wil-

ling for the experience to come only to the prophets themselves. (Indeed, prophesy is so socially disruptive, the prophetic religions much prefer it to be only in times past.) Whereas the mystical religions call the individual to inwardly seek and personally experience unity, the prophetic religions are group religions calling for action in the world.

But it is not quite as simple as the individual rejecting society or the socially involved rejecting inwardness. The Buddhist meditator arrives at compassion for all beings and the understanding that the individual, *per se*, does not exist. The Hebrew prophets also called for personal relationship to Yahweh. Yahweh (through Hosea): "What I want is love, not sacrifice; knowledge of God, not holocausts [burnt offerings]."

The Prophets

The Hebrew prophets established a mindset that is still prevalent in the great monotheistic faiths. Three features of this mindset stand in contrast to the pagan customs of their time:

First, they called for social justice.

As Isaiah speaks for Yahweh: "You may multiply your prayers; I shall not listen. Your hands are covered with blood, wash, make yourselves clean. Take your wrongdoing out of my sight. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good, search for justice, help the oppressed, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow."

**We have no sacred texts,
which means that any text
may be sacred. We have
no gurus, no teachers,
which means that life itself
must teach us.**

- Mary-Allen Walden

Second, they valorized history. In the agricultural religions, people participated in

the seasons with fertility and harvest rituals and reenacted the customs that the gods had established in the beginning of time. The march of empires, like natural disasters, were not part of the cycle, and were not given a religious significance. The prophets, however, preached the coming destruction of Israel at the hands of Assyria and Babylon would be Yahweh's punishment. History was an encounter with God.

Third, they exhibited a strident hostility to their neighboring cults. Paganism tended to be tolerant as long as the new deities did not threaten the old, but Yahweh demanded to be the Hebrews' primary god and then their only god, driving out the cult of Baal with a virulence that has lasted down to our present religious wars.

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Pure Religion

Unitarians in this country were puritans, and an aspect of Unitarian Universalism is dedicated to finding pure religion. It is natural that many of the spiritual seekers in the denomination are turning to the mystical, experiential religions. However, the social activists are strongly in the prophetic traditions. This naturally leads to the usual sort of religious misunderstandings and disagreements.

The spiritually inclined don't see what social activism has to do with religion. Why should anybody fill up their time with action? What do they get out of it? Theories abound: It's a way to hype their emotions. It's an excuse to socialize (which churches typically offer in place of true religion). It gives a feeling of solidarity - a kind of mob mentality. It gives the activists a feeling of importance by being able to see their issues on TV and saying, "I'm a part of that!"

All of these, of course, have some truth. But they ignore the possibility that social activists are called to it, as were the prophets, by whatever it is that was once called Yahweh, and now may have no name at all.

The social activists in turn do not understand the mystics. What do they think they are accomplishing? Theories abound: It's escapism; they're running away from reality. They're trying to get kicks from unusual mental states; it's a kind of masturbation. They're flakes. They're selfish.

And again, there is much truth in such criticisms. But it is also true that life is suffering even for the prosperous and healthy. We are all called upon to deal with the suffering of the world - a problem which may confound all solutions - and we are called to deal with it in our own individual ways.

Existence As Metaphor

All talk about God is metaphorical, even talk that pretends to be precise and abstract.

To say "God exists" is to speak metaphorically. When we say something exists, we are talking about an object, relationship, activity, or action that can indeed be found in our normal realm of experience. When we say that God exists, we are treating God metaphorically as an object.

This is a way of praising God, because we value physical objects. Our valuing of them is shown in our use of "substantive," "substantial," "weighty," "objective," as terms of praise.

But this treatment of God as an object, perhaps in his own paraphysical realm, has been known to be a wholly inadequate anthropomorphism since the time of the *Upanishads* -- for two-and-a-half millennia -- where Brahman is viewed as the ground of being, that which lies beneath and sustains all things.

But what of the other things we say exist? Would it be a reasonable metaphor to view God as a relationship? Or to view God as an activity or action?

They are not part of our mythology, although they may be part of our theology. Consider Buber's "I-Thou." Or consider the saying "God is love."

If you are one for whom the word "god" has positive associations, try using "god" as a verb for about a week. What activities would you use it for? Do people go a-godding together?

Or try "god" as an adjective or "godly" as an adverb expressing kinds of relationship. Same considerations: what would it mean?

There is a trick to these questions:

We actually have a hostility to God as shown in phrases like: "playing God," or "acts of God." And God is associated with an oppressive virtue that we respect, but have difficulty living with. So what would *you* want God to mean?

Autumn

Mary-Allen Walden writes:

I woke up this morning and it was Autumn. Suddenly it's cold and dark and the leaves are dropping from technicolor trees. I love it - it's my favorite season.

It's dramatic and mysterious and calls me to inner work - the work that clears the way for peace - for Winter, the peaceful season. It seems no accident that Halloween comes at this time. It's the first task of turning inward to put funny faces on our fears - our inner demons - and laugh at them and treat them gently lest they trick us because we've ignored them. And when our fears are laid to rest, we can then be grateful for the bounty of life as we celebrate Thanksgiving.

When we no longer fear that our cup is half empty, we can rejoice that it's half full. And when we've drunk that nourishing half-cup down into the peaceful darkness of our inner world, new seeds will appear, perhaps at Christmas time. Seeds always sprout in darkness, babies grow in darkness, the Creative springs from darkness. The darkness is our mother, and our task is to bring forth her gifts into the light. What a beautiful psychological drama is played out this time of year.

I love it - it's my favorite season.

