

Unitarian & Universalist Concepts of God©  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet  
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In today's reading, Rev. Buehrens points out that "Unitarians and Universalists... take their names from *ideas*." When the two traditions merged together in May of 1961 a new chapter in the history of both began. The merger was more than just two organizations coming together though, it represented the coming together of many people who had previously worshipped apart from one another. It also involved the coming together of ideas, ideas that the words "unitarian" and "universalist" were used to identify. The very name of our national association, the Unitarian Universalist Association now holds and carries these ideas from the past. I find it interesting that in many Unitarian Universalist congregations today, the idea that is at the very heart of both Unitarianism and Universalism gets little attention. You see, the meaning behind the names of both of these traditions is connected by a common thread, and that thread is tied directly to God. Here is how Buehrens states it in the reading:

"Universalists did not believe that a loving God would predestine human beings to an eternal hell. They affirmed an inclusive, universal plan of salvation. Unitarians set aside the idea of the Trinity. They affirmed first the unity of God and then the unity of humankind."

Rev. Buehrens, who was my minister when I lived in the Boston area, once shared with me another variation of the difference between Universalists and Unitarians. He told me, and here I quote, "Universalists believed that God was too good to choose some and condemn others while Unitarians were of the opinion that they were too good for God to condemn." As his written and spoken statements indicate, there are many ways to express an idea or a concept and each way may contain some new or different perspective.

It doesn't take much imagination to recognize that our Principles and Purposes contain elements of the unitarian and universalist perspectives that Rev. Buehrens points out. "The inherent worth and dignity of every person" certainly blends well with the Universalist view that God accepts every person as chosen and worthy of love. Just two hundred years ago this view of God's love and acceptance for all was far outside of the mainstream perspective.

Then there is "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." This clearly fits with affirming the unity of humankind which, as we heard in the reading, comes after the unity of God. The unitarian view that God is one is still considered to be a heretical belief and is in direct opposition to the commonly held Christian view of God as a trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost.

While both the universalist view and the unitarian view are still not the dominant perspectives in the Christian faith, they have shifted the course of what today is mainstream thought. I would offer as an example the Story for All Ages that we heard earlier. In this story, Desmond Tutu, now a retired Archbishop of the Anglican Church, flirts around the edges of both the universalist and unitarian perspectives as he repeatedly uses the phrase "Child of God." If we are all children of God then we truly are

all one—one family. According to Tutu, God’s dream is that everyone reaches out, cares about, and laughs with one another’s hearts. He even goes so far as to state that “Each of us carries a piece of God’s heart within us.” When I first read that line in the story I wondered if he was channeling the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was a well known Unitarian minister in the nineteenth century and a leader of the Transcendentalist movement here in America during that time. He wrote “Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us...there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.” If Emerson was alive today I am sure he would be delighted that an Anglican Archbishop would be echoing his sentiments.

I would guess though that most Unitarian Universalists today don’t consider how the unitarian and universalist views of God from the past may have significantly influenced the message that Archbishop Tutu lays out in *God’s Dream*. I say this because, since the merger in 1961, there has been a significant shift within our religious movement away from a focus on God. There has also been a dramatic reduction in the use of God language both at the national level as well as the congregational level. In other words, we talk less about God and we very probably think less about God. In our Principles and Purposes God is mentioned only once. In the remainder of our by-laws God isn’t mentioned at all. How is it that our faith tradition has gone from being named because of our views on God, to God getting very little of our attention? In typical UU style, I don’t believe there is one definitive answer. I would offer however, some possibilities that we might consider.

First, because our distant forbears were strong enough, determined enough, and smart enough to consider important issues carefully and thoroughly, they established a foundation for the questioning of long held and accepted beliefs and practices. As they established this foundation, they also created space for new ideas and concepts to be considered. Such questioning certainly wasn’t unique to our Unitarian and Universalist forbears. But the level to which they went, and their willingness to accept diverse opinions and perspectives, were considerable as well as quite unusual for most religious traditions. That isn’t to say they graciously and gratefully accepted and embraced each new view of God that came their way. There were some intense and significant disagreements within both traditions about some of the perspectives that arose. Universalists struggled with the issue of when and how each person would be reconciled with God. Would they have to suffer for a while after death in order to atone for the errors of their ways, or would they immediately get a free pass?

In the other branch of our faith tradition, Unitarians had their own struggles. Initially many in the Unitarian establishment of the eighteen hundreds were very cool toward the radical ideas being put forth by those such as Emerson who were part of the Transcendentalist movement. The Transcendentalists challenged the notion that the Bible, then accepted as the authoritative “Word of God,” was the primary place truth could be found. Emerson asserted that intuition and direct experience provided ample opportunity for experiencing God and for learning what was true. Eventually the Transcendentalists and those in the Unitarian establishment who held more traditional views found enough common ground to come to peace with one another. Today, Emerson and others in the Transcendentalist movement are considered important innovators in the Unitarian tradition.

Turmoil then arose again in the early parts of the twentieth century with the emergence of Humanism. According to Rev. Mark Harris, author of the *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism*, "Humanists said that God was not necessary to a worthwhile modern religion." A Unitarian minister named Curtis Reese was one of the early proponents of humanism. He claimed that liberalism was building a religion that could stand "even if the thought of God were out-grown." While Unitarianism was very liberal compared to other religious organizations of the time, the prospect of out-growing the thought of God was beyond the bounds for many leaders within the faith. For nearly thirty years a humanist/theist controversy sometimes raged and sometimes simmered within Unitarian ranks. Eventually, the controversy subsided and the animosity between humanists and theists lost its intensity.

Today, in Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country, people who hold significantly divergent ideas about God come together to join in worship. Some hold a belief in God, others hold that God is just a belief, an idea. In spite of their differing views, they work with one another on important issues such as immigration reform, voting rights, discrimination in its many forms and global climate change. They reach out to other communities, both religious and secular, in an effort to forge relationships, to break down prejudice, and to build trust. It seems to me that our history of questioning accepted concepts of God, of discussing alternative views that were outside of the mainstream, has helped us build a foundation for addressing the difficult issues in our world today.

In the sentence that comes after the reading Carolyn shared with us, Rev. Buehrens points out that both Unitarianism and Universalism "produced notable leaders and had a disproportionately large influence on American culture and public life, despite never becoming institutionally large themselves." Even today, after the merger of these two religious traditions, our combined association remains relatively small. Yet even though our numbers are small, our influence on important issues continues to be significant. One reason for that "disproportionately large influence" is that we are willing to consider and delve deeply into very large, complex, and challenging issues. Issues as large, as complex, and as challenging as God.

As we go forward may we, as people of faith, continue to explore and discuss ideas. May we continue the tradition of coming together, of asking questions, and of finding common ground as we live out our religious tradition, a tradition that strives to make a positive difference, both for today and for the future, in this lifetime and in this world.

Blessed be.