

When I began writing this sermon, I was reminded of a Peanuts cartoon from many years ago. Charlie Brown is sitting in class, beginning a test. The question was, "Explain World War II." The teacher added helpfully, "Use both sides of the paper, if necessary."

There is probably no word as difficult, among the many that cause difficulty for Unitarian Universalists, as the word God. Many of us come to UU wounded by the fundamentalist understanding of God. Others of us come to UU with the rejection by some scientists of all that can't be measured or observed.

The purpose of this sermon is not to make you believe in God, if you don't already. The purpose is to present some of modern theological thinking around the concept of God. The purpose is to build tolerance and understanding in this space for those among us who do believe in God.

I have read many books on theology, both in seminary and since. I have taken several courses in theology and have formally studied the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an. Some of my best theological training came during my 900 hours of chaplain training.// Where to start? "Use both sides of the paper, if necessary."

How does one reconcile what we learn from science and our understanding of God? For some of us, although I doubt the "us" are in this room, we reconcile by selectively rejecting what science teaches and by literally and selectively interpreting the Bible (or the Qur'an). In the words of critics, we "check our brains at the door."

I did my chaplain training at the Sutter Roseville hospital. Roseville has a large fundamentalist Christian population. Many of the patients I saw were fundamentalist Christian. The physicians also represented this population, although there were also Sikh, Muslim and Hindu doctors. What amazed me was how Christian literalist doctors, who applied the results of molecular biology and genetics research daily in their practices, could reject evolution.

For others of us, and I understand that there are at least few in this room, we reject the idea that there is a God. For us, we think that God and science are irreconcilable; that belief in God by necessity must reject what science tells us, therefore, God must go.

Richard Dawkins is an outspoken atheist with whom I'd guess many of you are familiar. He said in his book *The God Delusion*, "We are all atheists about most of the gods that societies have ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further."ⁱ Yes, one God further. But that one God is the God of fundamentalism, say critics, such as author and scholar Karen Armstrong. Armstrong has written extensively on religion in large, heavily footnoted tomes. I find her writing fascinating, but then my children tell me I am a geek. She has also been a keynote speaker at the UU General Assembly, giving the highly regarded and attended Ware Lecture in 2011.

Our leading quote in today's Order of Service is by Dawkins. The God hypothesis which he rejects states that "there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence, who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it."ⁱⁱ Armstrong counters, "The more recent atheism of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris...has focused exclusively on the God developed by the fundamentalisms."ⁱⁱⁱ

The God of fundamentalism. Atheism. What some call fundamentalist atheism. Is there no middle ground? Many theologians and many scientists think that there is. UU minister and former president of our denomination, Rev. John Buehrens, has been quoted as saying, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in. Maybe I don't believe in that God either."

Ian Barbour, professor emeritus of physics and religion at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, has written a wonderful little book, *When Science Meets Religion*.^{iv} He offers that there are four views of how science and religion interact. 1) They are in conflict. We've just heard that viewpoint. 2) They are independent, with different languages, functions and domains. The late Harvard professor of evolution, Stephen J. Gould, advocated for this position in his 1999 book *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*. 3) Science and religion may be in dialogue about such issues as presuppositions and limit questions or methodological and conceptual parallels. 4) Finally, they may be integrated.

Items 3 and 4, dialogue and integration between science and religion, are what most interest me.

In dialogue, scientists and theologians engage in critical reflection while respecting the integrity of each other's fields.^v Conceptual models are used in both fields to imagine that which cannot be observed. At its boundaries, there are limit questions in science which it cannot answer. An example: what came before the Big Bang? Is God perhaps the determiner of indeterminacies in quantum physics?^{vi}

Barbour gives three examples of how science and religion attempt to integrate. 1) In natural theology there is a long history of seeking suggestive evidence in nature of the existence of God. Recent discoveries about the early universe indicate that there were tipping points, all of which had to go exactly as they did, to allow for the development of life. For example, had the expansion rate of the universe one second after the Big Bang been very slightly less, the universe would have collapsed. Had it been very slightly greater, the evolution of life could not have occurred.^{vii}

2) A theology of nature attempts to understand religious experience and God in light of current science. Biochemist and theologian Arthur Peacocke "speaks of chance as God's radar sweeping through the range of possibilities and evoking the diverse potentialities of natural systems."^{viii} (repeat) Another version of a theology of nature is found in the writing of Sally McFague. She argues for an ecological theology in her book *The Body of God*.^{ix}

Theologians create models of God while realizing that any model they create is insufficient to describe the reality of God. Models help us to begin to understand some aspect of something ultimately incomprehensible, the great Mystery of the Universe, of Life. So, too, do models help to explain that which cannot be directly observed or fully understood in science. The world of quantum physics and the sub-atomic particle is an example. It was said of physicist Richard Feynman that he came closer to understanding quantum physics than anyone, but even he did not understand it.^x

The theological model that I have found most useful was formulated by Alfred North Whitehead in the 1920's. Whitehead was a Professor of Mathematics at Trinity College, Cambridge. Facing mandatory retirement, he went to Harvard in 1924, where he became a Professor of Philosophy. It was there that he developed what he called a process philosophy that attempted to incorporate the new physics into a systematic philosophy, or metaphysics. Remember, the decades preceding Whitehead's work had seen the advent of Einstein's general and special theories of relativity as well as quantum physics. This process philosophy eventually became Process Theology, or a theology of process. This is the third example provided by Barbour of how science and religion integrate.

The God of process philosophy exists both beyond the universe and embodied within it. This God offers possibilities and lures outcomes toward greater complexity. God's power lies in patience and love and is persuasive rather than coercive. God is changed by outcomes as the universe and life evolve. God feels the pain of our damaged Earth.//

I said earlier that some of my best theological training came during my work as a chaplain. Training is a misnomer, though. It was direct experience, experience that challenged my beliefs about what was happening. It included being challenged by my peer group.

One particular day stands out. I was called to the emergency room as soon as I entered the hospital. A young woman, a high school senior, a track star, was receiving everything that a modern day ER trauma unit can provide to try to save her life. She had been found that morning by her mother, not breathing. Her mother and a friend were in ER with her. Her father was on his way from Beale AFB. I spent most of my morning with the parents. I sat with them in the room when the doctor told them that, even should Debbie survive, she would likely be severely brain injured from her extended time without oxygen. I listened to them discuss their options, and whether they would want such a life for their daughter, whether she would want such a life. I could see that they were very close as a couple and a tightly knit family. I saw that they were being sustained by their belief in God.

I had other responsibilities in the hospital during the afternoon, but before leaving the hospital late in the day, I checked in with them. They were sitting vigil with Debbie in the ICU. She was not going to make it. They were waiting for their older daughter to arrive from Salt Lake City

before they removed life support. Standing behind them, I placed one hand on each of their shoulders and stood in silence. After a time, the father looked up at me and said, "You probably see this all the time, but this feels like we are the only ones this has ever happened to."//

OMG! How did I answer that? Several answers flew through my head, only to be dismissed. "Well, actually, I don't see this every day. Well, yes, parents do lose children." Both true statements. Both completely inappropriate and callous. What I said was, "Right now, in this moment, you are the only ones who've ever experienced this." I could see the relief in their faces. In that simple statement I had given them permission to fully feel their grief and their anger.

I wondered later at where those words had come from. I could say that they came out of my training, but I think that is only part of the story. I think my words came out of a deep compassion for this couple and their daughter. They came out of sitting with hundreds of patients and opening myself up to their stories and opening myself to the presence of Divine Love in the room. Those words came out of an invitation to love. Was I told by God to say those words? No. Was I invited by a God of love to show this couple deep compassion. Yes.

//And so, no matter your theology, I invite you to suspend judgment of your fellow friends and members whose understanding of the Mystery of this Universe, of the Spirit of Life, of God, is different than your own. We are all a part of the interconnected web of existence. As a covenantal people, we promise to accept each other and to encourage spiritual growth. We promise to support each other in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. These statements do not mean that we all end up with the same conclusions. We do not. And I repeat, we do not have a creed for a reason.//

Let it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be

ⁱ https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&es_th=1&ie=UTF-8#q=richard%20dawkins%20quotes Accessed 2/19/16

ⁱⁱ Richard Dawkins, *God Delusion*, p. 31, as quoted in Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, p 304

ⁱⁱⁱ Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, p. xvi

^{iv} 2000, HarperSanFrancisco

^v Barbour, p3

^{vi} Barbour, p3

^{vii} Barbour, p3

^{viii} Barbour, p32

^{ix} 1993, Fortress Press, Minneapolis

^x The reference for this is in an earlier sermon.