God Where are You?
A Little About My Theological Odyssey
By
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It wasn't until 1965, well after two worldwide wars and the Korean War in the same century, at the start Vietnam, that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled a person doesn't have to believe in God to be a Conscientious Objector. Prior to this decision applicants seeking such status were asked to check "Yes" or "No" to the question, "Do you believe in a Supreme Being?" If they checked "No," their application was denied since atheists were believed to have no conscience to begin with. To most people, at the time, the very idea that an atheist could morally object to anything seemed an absurd contradiction. How can one have morals without having religion? It's the same sort of response I get today when people find out I'm both an atheist and a minister, or that there are both believers and nonbelievers in our church. One fellow recently expressed relief to find out there are at least some believers among us, "because," he said, "you can't really call it a church if it's atheist."

This opinion represents a narrow understanding of religion that leaves out the 2.5 billion people alive today who are part of nontheistic religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Religious Humanism, and others. Some of these may have myths about various deities, but they are not defined by any specific theology. Unlike being a Christian, one isn't considered a Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, or Humanist because of what one believes about God. Adherents of these religions, rather, strive to live by their respective philosophies of life—Four Nobel Truths, Dharma and Karma, harmony with nature, and human agency. I personally believe anyone who devotes most their time and resources to anything is religious about it, be it to God or Golf, and anything in between.

It might surprise some of you to know that it has only been in recent years that I've taken to calling myself an atheist. As a child I wasn't part of a religious family, but I had an image of God in my mind as far back as I can remember that lasted many years. It had a giant body made of trees and its head was the Milky Way galaxy, which reminded me of an all-seeing-eye. I prayed to this god sometimes, especially when I was afraid and helpless, which was all too often. It never intervened to prevent the troubles of my childhood, but, to this day, on an emotional level, I feel its love and that it's still watching over me. That's pretty much the extent of the theology I managed to patch together and held throughout most my childhood.

As a teenager I became a born-again Christian, a "Jesus freak," as some nicknamed us, and started going to church, eventually landing at a nearby Southern Baptist Church. That's when my theology began to change, as I learned about God's supposed will and ways from others, and about his plan for my life and the lives of everyone, about the do's and don'ts, and, especially, about his obsession with what I think. There were good ideas and bad ideas, and it was a sin to have bad ideas. Those sinners who had them were to be converted or condemned. At this point God seemed like an invisible man with telepathic powers, a person

I just couldn't see who was always around and dispensed love and protection to those who held the right ideas, and anger and punishment to those with the wrong ones.

After ten years as a Christian, which included attending a Southern Baptist College and being ordained a Southern Baptist minister, I quit Christianity before completing seminary. This wasn't the result of any single event or falling out. I'd just grown up intellectually and could no longer maintain, what I considered, such primitive nonsense. I was fortunate, despite being on a ministerial track in college, to have professors who taught me to think critically about everything, including religion. Considering the perennial questions associated with the study of philosophy—especially epistemology, metaphysics, logic, and ethics—the conservative Christian theology I'd been taught became ludicrous to me. I felt a little embarrassed to have been so completely taken in by it, but mostly dismissed it as part of my maturation.

I still liked Jesus after that, although I understood he was only a historical person with some good ideas who lived and died admirably. And I still believed in God, though what exactly that meant became increasingly nebulous. I soon began substituting the word "Universe" for "God," which seems more like the original theology of my childhood, seeing God as a connecting force between everything, like a galaxy-headed tree.

Soon thereafter I turned to psychology, the study of the soul, in search of greater understanding of myself and the world. I eventually stumbled upon Erich Fromm's, *The Art of Loving*, in which he outlined theological development throughout human history. "In the beginning of this development," he explains, "we find a despotic, jealous God, who considers man, whom he created, as his property, and is entitled to do with him whatever he pleases."[1] This stage corresponds well with Developmental psychology's preconventional idea of morality, defined as extremist, authoritarian, punitive thinking. Fromm called it the *anthropocentric* stage because it perceives God to be a person, like oneself.

At the second stage of theological development, which Fromm called the *covenantal* stage, God and humans enter into a kind of contract that can't be broken unless one party violates the agreement. For example, "God makes a covenant with Noah," Fromm explains, "in which he promises never to destroy the human race again, a covenant by which he is bound himself."[2] This too corresponds well with the conventional stage of moral development, at which morality is based on law and order, and meeting social expectations.

But at theological maturation, if we get there, Fromm says, "God ceases to be a person, a man, a father; [but] becomes the symbol of the principle behind the manifoldness of phenomena…"[3] At this stage, he says, god is transformed "from the figure of a father into the symbol of his principles, those of justice, truth, and love. God *is* truth, God *is* justice."[4] In short, theologically speaking, God is no longer a person, but a principle. This stage, too, corresponds

[1] Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 57.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 58.
[4] Ibid., p. 57f.

perfectly with the post-conventional stage of moral development, with moral maturation, when morality is no longer based on rules but on universal principles, like love and justice, that transcend society's rules and conventions. This is where it become permissible, if not a requirement, to break the rules, through nonviolent civil disobedience, for example, when necessary to prevent injustice and harm to others.

This concept of God as a principle rather than a person struck a chord with me, and still does, as does Fromm's statement, "God cannot have a name. A name always denotes a thing, or a person, something finite. How can God have a name, if [God] is not a person, not a thing."[5] For this reason, "The truly religious person," he thought, "does not love God as a child loves [its] father or… mother," but sees God as a symbol of humanity's striving for "love, truth and justice," and the "full unfolding" of human potential.[6] When this happens, he says, one "does not speak about God—nor even mention his name. To love God, if [one] were going to use this word, would mean, then, to long for the attainment of the full capacity to love, for the realization of that which 'God' stands for in oneself."[7] God, in this sense, becomes humanity's highest aspirations and potential.

This is why Fromm came to define himself as an atheistic mystic, because, as he said, "The most I can do is to say what God is *not*, to state negative attributes, to postulate that he is *not* limited, not unkind, not unjust. The more I know what God is *not*, the more knowledge I have of God."[8] He felt it was not only impossible to talk about God in any meaningful way, but also unnecessary, if not unethical. As such, Fromm said, "[one] does not pray for anything, does not expect anything from God, …does not speak about God—nor even mention [God's] name."[9] This notion is true of mystical theology in general. Taoism says, "The name that can be named is not the eternal Name," and that, "Mystery within Mystery is the gateway to all understanding."[10] Hinduism says, "one can only say, 'not… not' [neti… neti]. [It] is ungraspable, for [it] cannot be grasped."[11] The Jewish Kabbalah says, "Every definition of God leads to heresy,"[12] St. John of the Cross said, "The soul travels to God not knowing, rather than knowing…"[13] and Meister Eckhart called God, "Absolute Nothing."

So, I'd be perfectly fine with continuing to call myself an atheistic mystic like my ideological mentor, were it not for a funny thing that happened on my way to work one day. Actually, it was my first day in the office here at UUCS more than seven years ago. I'd received a call from a TV news crew wanting to interview me about a controversial atheist ad campaign after it had been okayed to place on the sides of public buses. I was happy to comment and told the reporter I'm always pleased when freedom of speech is upheld in our society no matter what the issue. I wasn't sure why they wanted to talk to me, and they never asked anything about

[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., p. 59f.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., p. 60.
[10] *Tao te Ching* #1
[11] Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 4.5.15.
[12] Matt, Daniel C., *The Essential Kabbalah*, Quality Paper Back Book Club, New York, NY, 1995, p. 32.
[13] deNicolas, Antonio T., *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989 p. 232.

my religious beliefs, but that night I was identified on the news as, "Atheist minister Todd Eklof." It wasn't exactly how I was expecting my first day to end up, but nobody seemed to mind, and after I thought about it I realized it's true, I am an atheist. When most people ask if one believes in God, they're really asking if one believes in a person named, "God." Since I don't believe in a personal god, that is in a divine being that has consciousness and a personality, calling myself an atheist is a lot easier than jumping through all the intellectual hoops necessary to explain my complicated theology. So, thanks to KXLY's shoddy reporting, I've called myself an atheist ever since.

But sometimes I say, "Just because I'm atheist doesn't mean I don't believe in God." This, of course, reflects the sort of paradoxical reasoning that's typical of all mystics, our comfort being in the mist, with the fogginess, the cognitive dissonance, the cloud of unknowing and uncertainty that makes life worth living for us. To explain; at the first stage of development, when we see things dualistically—as black and white, hot and cold, right and wrong—the question of God's existence must be answered either "yes" or "no." Since this is the level at which the question is usually posed, I try to be as honest as possible. "No," I don't believe in what most people mean by God, that is, in a person named "God." But, if one wishes to make the question three-dimensional and theologize about higher principles, by saying, "God is Love," as Jesus did, or, "God is Truth," as Gandhi did, or, "God is Justice," as the Hebrew prophets did, then I am happy to admit I believe in God, since I believe in all of these impersonal principles.

So why don't I believe in a personal god? To me the answer should be obvious. It makes more sense to ask why anyone does believe in God? I disbelieve for two reasons. Firstly, such a notion defies reason. There is no empirical evidence that such a being can or does exist. In fact, all evidence is to the contrary. Science has explained our existence far more plausibly than any ancient creation stories have; and has uncovered no physical evidence pointing to a divine being. Though there are still many questions, many mysteries to be solved, and many that may never be solved, it is a fallacy to stuff the absence of our knowledge with the, so-called, God of the gaps. Saying, "We don't have the answers; therefore, God is the answer," is a *non sequitur*—it does not follow. We don't know what, if anything, existed before the Big Bang, for instance, but this doesn't lead to the conclusion God must have created it, no more than it suggests it must have been caused by advanced aliens, or is a holographic matrix being generated by a quantum supercomputer.

The second reason I disbelieve is because of what theology refers to as the "Problem of God." Do you know what the problem of God is? Evil and suffering. If God exists, is all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful, how can God allow so much suffering in the world? There have been many attempts to explain this, but none are very convincing. Some blame it on Free Will. God doesn't like to force people to follow "his" will. But if that were so, why threaten them with eternal Hell? Damnation seems pretty controlling to me—It's my way or the fry-way!

How, furthermore, if nothing exists outside of God, if God is omnipresent, is it possible to claim God isn't partly evil? Both cannot be true. Either God contains evil, or there is something more than God, or there is evil and no such thing as God. This contradiction is so problematic that some, rather than denying the existence of God, have denied the existence

of evil. They argue evil isn't something that exists but is the absence of God's goodness. If this were so, however, it still denies that God is everywhere, which leads to other theological problems. Still others have claimed suffering and evil are just illusions, either a kind of tough love meant to teach us valuable lessons that we'll understand someday in a higher plain of existence, or else an illusion caused by our own minds.

I think there's ample proof of real suffering and injustice in the world, too many unanswered prayers, for there to be an omniscient, omnipresent, all-loving, omnipotent being out there. No loving person with the power to prevent human sorrow and cruelty could justify not doing so. I do believe the nature of the universe is love and justice, but I consider these weak forces, or akin gravity, that only delicately hold and draw us together.

Many years ago, while still in my twenties, I had a lucid dream. Lucid dreaming means being aware one is dreaming. I was in a medieval tavern where there was much drinking and partying going on when I suddenly became aware I was dreaming. Since dreams have been said to come from God, I decided to use the opportunity to get some answers. I exited the rustic tavern and stepped into a cold, barren environment consisting of dark gray skies and nothing both a dead, rocky surface stretching as far as I could see. I yelled, "God, where are you," receiving only my own echo in reply. "God, where are you?" I repeated. Still nothing. Then, for a third time, I got only the word "God" out of my mouth when my eyes snapped opened and I found myself wide awake in my bed.

I've thought about this dream over the years, about what it might mean, if anything. At first, I wondered if it meant God isn't in my dreams, or in some place to be discovered, but exists in the waking world, in the reality of life, embodied in oneself, in the way we incarnate our values and highest aspirations. In this sense God isn't a person, but a relationship between persons, a way of being with each other and in the world. Wherever two or more are gathered and relate to each other in a loving way, God becomes the relationship between us. Wherever we relate to each other, including to other beings and the Earth, in unloving ways, God truly is absent, or but a weak force barely holding us together.

But I've also wondered if that dark, gray, barren world, in which no voice answered my call, means there is no answer because there is no God, and that I needed to wake up an realize it. It was easy to enjoy life inside the rustic tavern of my imagination, while I was asleep, but I needed to wake up by stepping outside my unconscious, autistic reality, to face the empirical world on its own terms. Even though the world can be a cold, dark, empty place with no answers, I need to deal with reality objectively, as it is, not as I wish it to be.

Perhaps, like Scrooge, this dream was no more than the result of a bad bowl of gruel before bedtime, or maybe both my interpretations are true—there is no person named God who can answer our prayers, or the perennial questions of life, yet, it is possible to manifest God, something divine between us, through loving and caring relationships, and by incarnating our greatest values and highest aspirations in the world around us.