

A Pez-Dispenser God

By Donne Hayden

Some of us at Cincinnati Friends have discussed developing a First Day School class for Young Friends from ages 10-15 or so. As it stands, we have First Day classes for younger children, but nothing on Sundays for older kids and teenagers, perhaps because until recently we haven't had many kids from 10-15 coming to meeting. On the other hand, if we had something to offer this age group, we might find more parents bringing them.

Because I've been thinking about religious education Quaker-style in our congregation, an article titled "Faith, Nice and Easy" in this week's *The Christian Century* caught my attention. The article is based on a National Survey on Youth and Religion conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and reported by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton in their 2005 book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. From 2002-2003, 3370 young people were interviewed in a random-dial telephone survey in geographic locations across the U.S. Those responding represented "conservative, mainline and black Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and Mormonism, and the category, nonreligious."¹

Here is a sample transcript from the study:

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 2005, p. 272.

"What is God like?" asks the interviewer.

" 'Um. Good. Powerful. '

" 'Okay, anything else?'

" 'Tall. ' "

Later: " 'What good has God done in your life?'

" 'I, well, I have a house, parents, I have the internet, I have a phone, I have cable.'"²

This is, apparently, a fairly standard response among the teenagers who participated in the National Survey on Youth and Religion. The researchers, Smith and Denton, identified this attitude as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," or "Moralistic Theistic Deism," (MTD) which is what most kids are picking up from their parents and church communities about religion.

Here are the fundamentals of Moralistic Theistic Deism:

- 1) *A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.*
- 2) *God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.*
- 3) *The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.*
- 4) *God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.*
- 5) *Good people go to heaven when they die.³*

²Hanna Rosin for *The Washington Post*, quoted on Amazon.com website under "Editorial Reviews." Accessed 08/15/10 http://www.amazon.com/Soul-Searching-Religious-Spiritual-Teenagers/dp/019518095X#_

³Smith and Denton,

How does this strike you? Does that God seem remarkably *inconsequential*? What are the ramifications of having such a God? None, really.

The writer in *The Christian Century* refers to this Moralistic Theistic Deism perception of God “as a Pez dispenser that delivers good feelings on demand.”⁴

Another article on the subject in *Christianity Today* quotes Smith and Denton as saying that “God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.”⁵

I suspect this attitude has something to do with parents not wanting to saddle their kids with fear and guilt the parents may have acquired in their own early exposure to religion. Certainly there is no fear in this “Pez Dispenser God,” no guilt associated with such a deity, who seems to ask nothing and exists only to serve humanity in a limited capacity.

But there is also nothing to inspire or challenge us in this bland God who is basically a nice guy. We humans don’t respect nice guys much—they finish last and all that. What we have in Moralistic Theistic Deism is a deity we can control and ignore at will. Compare the colorless god of Moralistic Theistic Deism with Thomas Merton’s understanding of deity:

Our God also is a consuming fire. And if we, by love, become transformed into God and burn as God burns, His fire will be our everlasting joy. But if we refuse God’s love and remain in . . . opposition to Him and to other [human beings] then will God’s fire (by our own choice rather

⁴ Kenda Creasy Dean, “Faith, Nice and Easy,” *The Christian Century*, August 10, 2010, pp.22-27.

⁵ Collin Hansen, “Death By Deism,” *Christianity Today*, April (Web-only), 2009. Accessed 08/14/10
<<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/aprilweb-only/116-11.0.html>>

than His) become our everlasting enemy, and Love, instead of being our joy, will become our torment and our destruction.

When we love God's will we find God and own God's joy in all things. But when we are against God, that is, when we love ourselves more than God, all things become our enemies. They cannot help refusing us the lawless satisfaction our selfishness demands of them because the infinite unselfishness of God is the law of every created essence and is printed in everything God has made.⁶

Merton's God demands something of us—unselfish, compassionate love—and we'll receive little but torment so long as we pit ourselves *against* God's unselfish Love. When "we love ourselves more than [God]," we will not find deep happiness *in spite of* our nice home, our cable, Internet, and Blackberry.

Or consider this view of God from Walter Brueggeman:

*Kingdoms rage;
empires tremble;
cities totter.*

*You speak assurance;
You designate human agents;
You say, "This is my beloved son"
You say, "This is my anointed."*

*Right in the middle of chaos,
you designate human agents who do your will.*

And we are not sure:

*We would rather it were you,
directly*

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Collected Writings*.

straight on and visible.

*But you stay hidden in your holy splendor,
and we are left with human agents
about whom we are never sure.*

*So we name Jesus, "son of David";
so human and so frail, even if kicked upstairs;
so vulnerable, even if transforming in song and creed.*

*And then, in a flash, it may dawn on us:
You call and designate people like us, your agents.*

*Kingdoms rage . . . and we are called.
Empires tremble . . . and we are designated.
Cities totter . . . and we are summoned . . .
like the first David, like the second David . . .
us, vulnerable, frail, anxious, your people.
And we are dazzled. Amen.⁷*

Now here is a God to be reckoned with, a *consequential* God from whom there is no escape. Try as we might to leave God alone to take care of the universe, Brueggeman's God calls us and designates us, requires us to act as holy agents, to make our lives speak, to participate when kingdoms rage, empires tremble and cities totter.

Here is God as perceived by George Fox:

*He is the living God that clothes the earth with grass and herbs, and causes the trees to grow
and bring forth food for you,
and makes the fishes of the sea to breathe and live,
and makes the fowls of the air to breed,*

⁷ Walter Brueggeman, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggeman* (Minneapolis: Fortress/Augusburg Press, 2003) p. 105.

and causes the roe and the hind, and the creatures, and all the beasts of the earth to bring forth, whereby they may be food for you.

He is the living God, that causes the stars to arise in the night, to give you light, and the moon to arise to be a light in the night.

He is the living God, that causes the sun to give warmth unto you, to nourish you when you are cold.

He is the living God, that causes the snow and frost to melt, and causes the rain to water the plants.

He is the living God, that made the heaven and the earth, and the clouds, and causes the springs to break out of the rocks, and divided the great sea from the earth, and divided the light from the darkness, by which it is called day, and the darkness night, and divided the great waters from the earth, and gathered them together: which great waters he called sea, and the dry land earth:

he is to be worshipped that doth this.

He is the living God, that gives unto you breath, and life, and strength, and gives unto you beasts and cattle, whereby you may be fed and clothed.

He is the living God, and he is to be worshipped.

And that which gives you to be sensible of him, and to know him, is that which convinceth you in your hearts of sin and unrighteousness. . . .

the living God is he that gives you life, and breath, and strength, and all things that are good, and would have you to feel after him [i.e. as he shows you], with that which checks you for sin and evil; and would have you to worship him in spirit, and serve him who is holy and righteous, and to live in peace . . .

George Fox's God is the answer to my personal greatest question: Why? Whatever it is—Force, Spirit, Cosmic Consciousness—that makes trees and plants grow and critters exist,

that commands light and dark, whatever is responsible for all things good—*that* is the entity which knows why, and the God I conceive of. That God is also a God who holds humans accountable for our wisp of conscious thought, since we *do* know the difference between good and evil—why else would we know the difference?

The 21st century Quaker mystic, Rufus Jones, phrased it this way:

Spirit . . . is the best word there is to express the essential nature of God. It signifies that [God] is not to be confused with matter nor to be found in a framework of space. [God] is like that highest, purest inner nature in ourselves which we call "spirit." [God] is intelligent, [God] is purposeful. [God] is devoted to the realization of the good. [God] is what we are trying to be. And wherever in the universe the good is being achieved, wherever truth is triumphing, wherever holiness is making its power known—there is spirit, there is God."

Where good is, where truth is, where holiness is, says Rufus Jones, there God is. (Or as Leo Tolstoy would have it, "Where Love Is, God Is.")

But there are no *images* associated with good, truth, holiness, or love, nothing solid to show our children—we can tell stories with actions that illustrate these qualities, but the qualities don't lend themselves to single images. What image could we use to inspire children, what sort of figure with more Presence than a Pez Dispenser doling out bland tablets of goodness?

Maybe we can use images from their own lives and experiences. Even pampered kids who never lift a finger at home sometimes encounter a Force they cannot resist, as for instance, the tough-but-devoted coach who pushes his players to the limits of their abilities, or

the “Stand and Deliver” teacher relentless in her refusal to let a child fail, who keeps making the student do something over until, lo and behold, the kid really does get it right!

Perhaps we *can* make use of scripture again—use it for its language and rich imagery of how, under God’s influence, humans may manifest love and compassion; images that show God’s presence (Love) working among us the way a single mustard seed takes over and covers an entire field; where an enemy helps a wounded man that his own kind won’t help, where the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given water, and those in prison are visited.

Perhaps we can help a young person imagine God as a force/light/energy/entity who has enough influence and power to *matter*, to be *of consequence*. Before we can teach our children about such a God we must ask ourselves what we believe--if we don’t believe in a God that matters, we can’t teach our children to do so (and probably don’t want to). But if we **do** believe that something people have called “God” exists, regardless of what we call it, do we have the courage to warn our children that God may demand more of them than they think they can do? Does our own doting love for them preclude our being able to be honest about how much a life under the Spirit may cost them? Shall we tell them that God does not dispense “good feelings on demand,” but requires us to serve others instead of being served?

Perhaps we can speak to children of a God who—knowing we humans seldom (if ever) grow through ease, comfort, or happiness—tests us, makes us uncomfortable, gives us difficult lives, pushes us to “live up to the measure of Light we have been given,” all the while surrounding us with Love that will not let us go.