

Godtalk

Last week I spoke about progressive Christianity and the Phoenix Affirmations. It was my intent to talk more about the Affirmations this week, but it occurred to me I must clear the way by talking about language and the use of certain words—you know, “God-talk,” two particularly large boulders in our path are the words “God” and “Christ.” First, please know it is not my purpose to convert anyone or convince anyone to believe a particular way. So that you all know what I mean when I say “God,” I want to establish how I use the word and the concept in messages.

This week I’ll focus on the word “God” which comes from Old English.

O.E. *god* "supreme being, deity," from Proto-Germanic. **guthan* (cf. Dutch. *god*, German. *Gott*, Old Norse *gu_*, Gothic *gu_*), from Proto-Indo-European **ghut-* "that which is invoked" (cf. Skt. *huta-* "invoked," an epithet of Indra), from root **gheu(e)-* "to call, invoke." But some trace it to Proto-Indo-European **ghu-to-* "poured," from root **gheu-* "to pour, pour a libation" . . . ¹

Hundreds of images of God occur in the pages of the Old and New Testaments. Even though our lives are radically different from the lives of those who created the images in words, we still respond to their images. Unfortunately, we don’t respond in the same way they did—and in fact, we find some of their images unsavory, unsettling, and unacceptable.

This English word has for centuries been the source of infinite comfort and infinite sorrow. Today, it has the power to generate bitter controversy, as in whether or not it ought to appear on U.S. money, and whether or not we should use “God-Talk” on Sunday mornings in churches and Quaker meetings.

¹ Online Etymology Dictionary.

Perhaps you had a bad experience with someone who used the word “God” to describe a punishing judge, an unfair and petulant father, a vengeful old man in the clouds. Perhaps you are offended by the masculine gender assigned to divinity in the Hebrew and Christian tradition. Perhaps you do not believe that what we call “God” exists. All of these are legitimate concerns or objections to the word “God” which I share.

For instance, I cannot accept the vengeful God portrayed in the Old Testament; I am certain that Divinity has both masculine and feminine qualities; I do not believe that God is a giant old man in the sky. But I got tired of trying to find other words to express my understanding of “What cannot be spoken with words, but that whereby words are spoken.” I finally decided the word “God” is as good as any other and less awkward than many. My solution was to re-define consciously what *I* mean when *I* say “God,” realizing that everyone has a personal and unique understanding of this word.

The recognition of this was expressed by Quaker writer Kathleen Lonsdale when she wrote in 1962,

If you were to ask ten Quakers to explain to whom they were listening and speaking in the silence, and just what was their idea of God, I doubt very much whether you would get two identical answers; and I doubt still more whether agnostics would find one answer to satisfy them among the lot. The fact is, that when we try to explain, even to ourselves, what we mean by God, ordinary words fail us.²

We can seek other words, of course—the Light Within, the Eternal Light, the Almighty, the Divine, and many other lovely alternatives—but having to stop and search for an *inoffensive* word takes the focus off the content of what we want to communicate. In reality, there are no words that really capture “God-ness”—not in English nor any

² Quoted in Catherine Whitmire’s *Plain Living: A Quaker Path to Simplicity*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2001), page 108.

other language or tradition. Here are some quotations on the difficulty of capturing God in words:

- 1) The Way that can be expressed
Is not the eternal Way;
The Name than can be defined
Is not the unchanging Name.
—*Tao Te Ching*

[in other words, the God that can be defined is not God]

- 2) What cannot be spoken with words, but that whereby words are spoken:
Know that alone to be [God] Brahman, the Spirit; and not what people here adore.
What cannot be thought with the mind, but that whereby the mind can think . . .
What cannot be seen with the eye, but that whereby the eye can see . . .
What cannot be heard with the ear, but that whereby the ear can hear . . .
What cannot be indrawn with breath, but that whereby breath is indrawn:
Know that alone to be [God] Brahman, the Spirit; and not what people here adore.
—*Upanishads*

- 3) *Harih Aum!* AUM, the word, is all this, the whole universe. A clear explanation of it is as follows: All that is past, present and future is, indeed, AUM. And whatever else there is, beyond the threefold division of time—that also is truly AUM.

All this is, indeed, [God]Brahman. . . .

He is the Lord of all. He is the knower of all. He is the inner controller. He is the source of all; for from him all beings originate and in him they finally disappear. (from the *Mandukya Upanishad*)

- 4) Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (*Exodus 3:13-15*)

- 5) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth . . .
(*John 1:1 and 1:14*)

and finally,

- 6) Whatever
your mind comes at,

I tell you flat,
God is not that!

(*Rufus M. Jones*, Quaker writer and mystic)

You may have recognized some of these; the first was from the Chinese *Tao Te Ching*, the second and third from the Hindu *Upanishads*, the fourth from Exodus in the Old Testament, the fifth from the Gospel of John in the New Testament, and the last from Quaker mystic, Rufus M. Jones in 1947. Words about God are problematic in any time and place. As the old joke says “you say God *Yahweh* and I’ll say God mine.”

When I taught a course called “Theory of Knowledge,” we studied the way humans use language. One concept that stays with me is: “*The word is **not** the thing.*” For instance, the word “podium” – is a certain arrangement of noise: “po” “di” “um,” and if I write it down, “P-O-D-I-U-M” is a certain arrangements of marks we all agree represent that sound. The noise I make with my mouth or the marks I scribble on paper or the symbols I type on a keyboard are just that—noises, scribbles, and symbols, but not the **thing** they refer to. That sound and those scratches or symbols *refer* to this thing—but they are not the thing itself. In the material world, it’s not difficult to grasp the fact that the sound and what it refers to are not inextricably connected. I could, for instance, make a different sound when I referred to this thing—I could call it a “pulpit” or a “raccoon.” The important element is that we all agree that a certain sound refers to a particular object.

A familiar take on this is found in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet has discovered the mysterious young man who flirted with her at a party is named Romeo Montague. Her family, the Capulets, have been engaged in a longstanding feud with the Montague family. Disappointed, she speaks aloud from her balcony,

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
 Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
 What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
 Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
 Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
 What's in a name? that which we call a rose
 By any other name would smell as sweet . . .

So would God by any other name still be . . . well, whatever we consider God to be?

To digress slightly, The Religious Society of Friends was founded by people who understood God and Christ in a new way, or as they maintained, in the way the first Christians understood God and Jesus, the one “anointed” and called for special duty. (The word “Christ” comes from the Greek word meaning “anointed.”) These founders rejected what they called “the outward sacraments” like communion and baptism, perceiving them as empty forms designed to give power and authority to the Church, but not called for in the Scriptures. Friends understood baptism as a spiritual event that occurred when one was first filled with the Holy Spirit, and communion as what happened spiritually in silent worship when one was infused with The Light. For Friends, these were “inward sacraments,” matters of power, not form, and most Friends today retain this understanding. Although they may have prayer, scripture reading, hymn singing and ministerial sermons, even programmed meetings do not have these ceremonies and rituals.

In 2003, I attended Indiana Yearly Meeting for the first time. During the Meeting for Business session, some of the more conservative, traditionally evangelical monthly meetings, led by ministers who came from other denominations who now served in Friends’ “churches,” called for approving the use of the outward sacraments of communion and baptism in Quaker meetings. They argued that adding these elements

to worship would bring in new members who were accustomed to them in other churches. After a good deal of discussion, a white-haired woman in the middle of the auditorium stood to speak. She acknowledged that those who wished to have communion and baptism should have them, but she continued, “I have been a Quaker all my life. If you add these outward sacraments to Quaker meetings, where will *I* go?” In other words, there are many churches where one may be baptized and take communion—only among Quakers may I avoid such rituals if I find them unnecessary and meaningless.

I have a similar question for people who object to “Godtalk” in churches or Quaker meetings for worship on Sunday mornings. Those who are offended by talk about God and Christ may go *anywhere else* and avoid hearing such talk. But if I cannot use the word ‘God’ or talk about the teachings of Jesus in meeting on Sunday morning, where can *I* go? This avoidance of “Godtalk” is a phenomenon not only in some Quaker meetings, but the predominant phenomenon in liberal denominations like Unitarian Universalists. Are these same folks offended by mention of Buddha or Krishna or Allah? If those who don’t believe in God insist that believers *not* use “Godtalk” in churches and meetings, aren’t they as guilty of attempting “thought-control” as religious zealots who insist “Godtalk” be permitted in schools and government offices? Certain places are appropriate for God talk and certain places are not appropriate. Perhaps I am out of line for thinking that, of all places, a Meeting for Worship should be a place where divinity and the life of the Spirit may be acknowledged and discussed. Where, if not in places of worship on Sunday mornings is it more appropriate to freely discuss the teachings of Jesus or our understandings of God (whether we say “God,” or “Ha Shem” or “the Light” or Allah)?

Most of us have heard the phrase “God is dead,” and we may even know that Nietzsche said it, but perhaps you don’t know that God did not “die” a natural death. Nietzsche said much more than that “sound bite” so widely used among skeptics. Here is the full version, which I find incredibly moving and powerful:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, “I seek God! I seek God!” As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Why, did he get lost? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated?” Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances.

“Whither is God?” he cried. “I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us—for the sake of this deed he will be part of a higher history that all history hitherto.”

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. “I come too early,” he said then; “My time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of man . . .”

It has been related further that on that same day the madman entered diverse churches and there sang his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said to have replied each time, “What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”

– Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)