READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

People exist in a cosmic setting. Human nature has its ultimate ground. We live in a spiritual environment. We are integral parts of this cosmic creativity—co-creators with it. Yet I suspect the question of the nature of God or Ultimate Reality is an open one for many of us. We know we are part of a cosmic reality greater than ourselves, but we are hard put to name it. For some it is God, for others Nature, or Cosmos, or Being Itself. Some believe that to name it is to diminish it.

Among the more common theological positions regarding God are the following (here I am indebted to Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor for some categories and descriptions—his words in quotes):

Theism: belief in a personal God who has will and with whom prayer is a means of communication. Theistic monism holds that "the divine alone is real; the world or nature is at best an illusion or mere appearance." Theistic dualism holds "the divine is completely transcendent over nature; the divine and nature constitute totally different realms of reality." Naturalistic theism is the belief that "Nature includes the divine; God or the divine is but one force or process operating in the natural world."

Atheism: active disbelief in the existence of a God or gods. "Nature alone is real; the divine is either an illusion or an imaginative representation or symbol of some aspect of the natural world."

Agnosticism: ultimate uncertainty about the existence of God.

Humanism: focus on belief in humanity as central, without divine beings. "A naturalistic and non-theistic interpretation of religion, emphasizing humanly significant actions and experiences."

Liberal Christianity: "Adherence to the Christian tradition, viewed in light of reason and contemporary interpretations of traditional symbols and scriptures."

Neopaganism: "an earth-centered and often polytheistic tradition that sees divinity in everything and emphasizes ritual practices and participatory experience."

Pantheism: equation of God with nature. "The divine and nature are in some sense identical; nature itself is divine."

Panentheism: belief that God is both immanent (active within us) and transcendent (a divine being). "The divine is independent of and transcends nature, but also includes nature."

Process Theology: belief that God is not a being, but a process in which God, by analogy, can be considered the mind of the universe. "A conception of the world as a social organism growing toward fulfillment by means of mutual influences, including the persuasive aims of God."

World Religions: "various forms of response and adaptation to world religions such as Buddhism and Judaism."

In recent years the patriarchal god of the biblical tradition has been challenged by feminist theology in which the goddess is emphasized. Scholars have discovered or rediscovered a long tradition of female deities. Riane Eisler, for example, in *The Chalice and the Blade,* describes a Mother Goddess or Giver of All. Describing reality as the great cosmic womb, she suggests that the central religious symbol was not man dying on the cross, but woman giving birth. Love of life and not fear of death was dominant in society, art, and culture. She finds these feminine values lead away from the competitive way to the partnership way.

From an earth-centered perspective Starhawk, in *The Spiral Dance,* suggests three basic principles of Goddess religion: immanence, interconnection, and community. Immanence suggests the divine is within nature; as we are in nature, we are part of the divine and have responsibility for helping to preserve life on earth. Interconnection points to the cosmos as

one living organism of which we are a part. "What affects one of us affects us all." Goddess religion is lived in community—its focus is not individual salvation, but growth that comes through human interaction and cooperation. This community includes not only its human members, but all plants and animals and systems that compose the earth. Clearly Eisler and Starhawk speak to the Unitarian Universalist concern for the "interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

In the *Christian Century,* Shirley Ann Ranck puts this case for feminist spirituality:

> [It] identifies the goddess with Ultimate Reality rather than with the supernatural and seeks power in harmony rather than in dominance. . . . I am not at all interested in substituting a female parent for a male parent as a deity. But I am very much interested in reclaiming the thousands of years of human religious history which preceded the rise of patriarchal religions, a history in which female images of the divine were supreme. We need to honor that history before we can claim any wholeness for the future.

Liberation theology (feminist, black, Latino, Asian, among others) posits a much more political deity. Here we find God's option for the poor and the oppressed. This is a liberator God who, having led Moses and the Hebrew people from the evil clutches of the Pharaoh, now promises to work with justice-seeking people to liberate people from today's oppression of poverty, environmental degradation, and dehumanization in a technological world. While this God of Liberation does not guarantee victory, it is clearly a God who takes sides. Liberation theology poses an interesting predicament for Unitarian Universalists who tend to be the "haves" of society, not the "have nots" to whom the God of Liberation appeals. For a good discussion of the implications of liberation theology on Unitarian Universalism, see *A Reason for Hope: Liberation Theology Confronts a Liberal Faith* by Fredric John Muir (see Selected Bibliography on page 95).

What a striking contrast Goddess and liberation theology make with the historical, traditional, and often abstract understandings of deity. Historically, there have been a number of so-called "proofs" for the existence of God, logical exercises that lead one to believe. Here are some of the more common "proofs," drawing heavily on former Associated Press religion writer George Cornell.

Ontological: This is the argument from being itself. We are unique among creatures in realizing the limits of our being. In short, we are finite beings. But we have been created and there must be some Infinity beyond us that can create. This is, as Cornell says, "an immediately experienced, existential pointer to God." We are anxious about the end of our being, not only dying itself but having to die—to be no more. We can understand this "nonbeing" only by looking at it from a transcendent perspective of the Infinite—God—the Ground of Being.

Cosmological: We live in an observable world of cause and effect. If this chain of cause and effect could be traced back to its beginning, there must have been a first "uncaused cause"—God. Similarly, since movement requires prior movement to produce it, there must have been an origin to the process, the first "prime mover"—God. The complex, intricate, and apparently orderly design of the universe from atom to star could not have resulted from random events; it required some infinitely intelligent planner—God. All sciences are utterly dependent on this orderliness. We live in an imperfect world, but how do we know it is imperfect? Because we have the idea of Perfection; the fact of the good implies there must be the best—God. There is a contingent quality in nature—things could either be or not be. Since we observe that things do exist, there must be something to create anything out of nothing, thus making necessary something that always has being—God.

Moral: Inherent within us is a sense of moral law (the good, the right), of oughtness, a voice of conscience that in some cases may demand sacrifice of our self-interest, safety,

or even survival for the sake of something better. This cannot be explained merely by biology or psychology, since it may contradict them. But it is very real. It seems to be a universal reality. It can be taught, but where do the teachers get it? Since it transcends the human, it must be superhuman—God. It is illustrated by the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative" to universalize the highest good, the "summum bonum"—God.

Teleological: *Telos* means purpose. There appears to be purpose in the universe; even evolution seems to move in a distinct direction, always toward higher and more complex forms. That goal is what the noted paleontologist and Catholic scholar Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called the "Omega Point"—God. This parallels the scientific concept of a dynamic and ever evolving cosmos. This cosmic purpose has been caught up in process theology which understands all reality as a great process, equally open to error and human evil, as well as to newness and novelty. This process God is not simply a past Creator, but is ahead of humanity, drawing us forward in hope and promise toward a new future.

One can question each of these "proofs" of God in terms of the assumptions made. We can argue with them because they project human ideas, feelings, desires, and will on an infinite cosmic screen. Is there really purpose in the cosmos, or merely a magnificent but undifferentiated process of trial and error? Was Creation intended or simply a fortuitous cosmic accident? Who can know? Is there such a thing as The Good, or is that merely human wishful thinking? Was there a beginning at all, or is Ultimate Reality more cyclical in nature?

Paul Rasor has recently suggested that liberal theology has moved away from the authority of institutions and traditions and toward the internal authority of the individual. There is a strong emphasis on human reason in which everything is subject to criticism. The emphasis has been on God as immanent, toward a monistic view of nature as one process, and an understanding that truth changes over time. The language of science and philosophy has come to be preferred over myth and story. There has been more emphasis on the cognitive over the affective dimensions of experience.

However, this pattern is changing as affective and experiential dimensions of liberal religion challenge objective rationality for supremacy among us. We are increasingly less concerned with answering the question of the existence of God or responding to proofs of God and much more concerned that religious liberals of all ages have experiences that may be called divine. Many are today more comfortable articulating the *experience* of the sacred than the *existence* or *non-existence* of a divine being.

It may be that the most valuable function Unitarian Universalist religious education can perform is asking the right questions about Ultimate Reality: Is it benign? Does it have a will of its own? Does it intervene in human affairs? Does it make any difference in our lives? We may not succeed in answering all of our questions. The provisional answers we have found may only serve to raise a whole set of new questions. In some ways we may feel as confused as ever, but perhaps we will be confused on a higher level and about more important things.

It may be that God is not a noun, but a verb, as feminist Mary Daly suggests. The word "God" may not refer to any being up there or out there or even in there, but to a divine process of which we are a part. It may be that we experience the divine in relational power—that it is created out of the gathering of people in worship or in pursuit of a noble cause.

I think of the simple story of a conversation between the priest and the peasant while viewing the latter's fine garden. "You and the Lord," said the priest, "have worked well here." The peasant then said to the priest, "You should have seen the place when the Lord had it alone."

Background Reading

Adams, James Luther. *On Being Human Religiously*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1986, pp. 91–101.

Eisler, Riane. *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future.* Magnolia, MA: Peter Smith, 1994.

Muir, Fredric John. *A Reason for Hope: Liberation Theology Confronts a Liberal Faith.* Carmel, CA: Sunflower Ink, 1994.

WORKSHEET 2

PERSONAL BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

1. Which one of the following statements comes closest to expressing your beliefs about God? (circle one)

   a. "God" is a supernatural being who reveals himself in human experience and history.
   (2.9% in 1967) (4% in 1987)

   b. "God" is the ground of all being, real but not adequately describable.
   (23.1% in 1967) (28% in 1987)

   c. "God" may appropriately be used as a name for some natural process within the universe, such as love or creative evolution.
   (44.2% in 1967) (49% in 1987)

   d. "God" is an irrelevant concept, and the central focus of religion should be on man's knowledge and values.
   (28.0% in 1967) (18% in 1987)

   e. "God" is a concept that is harmful to a worthwhile religion.
   (1.8% in 1967) (2% in 1987)

2. A new question about God concepts was added in 1987: "The way I would describe the divine for myself . . ."

   ____ creative force (29%)

   ____ highest potential (18%)

   ____ harmony with nature (11%)

   ____ unknowable power (11%)

   ____ uncertain (11%)

   ____ superior being (3%)

   ____ meaningless (3%)

   ____ harmful concept (14%)

3. In her Doctor of Ministry project, *Subjective Religious Experience among Unitarian Universalists: A Generational Study*, Unitarian Universalist Minister Linda Smith Stowell listed still other categories for beliefs in ultimate reality. Her statement began, "I conceive God as . . ." (check all that apply)

____ the Interconnected Web.

____ a real power which is a part of all things.

____ a human creation—functions to reinforce society's ideals.

____ a "being" with whom one can experience relationship.

____ a human creation—functions to preserve existing power structure.

____ a hypothetical ideal.

____ "the opiate of the masses."

____ a separate, concrete reality.

A similar comparison can be made in regard to prayer, although the 1987 study used the words "prayer or meditation."

1. Which of the following describe the purpose or function that prayer fulfills for you? (check all that apply)

____	communion with God	(12.4% in 1967)	(39% in 1987)
____	petition (for self)	(7.5% in 1967)	(30% in 1987)
____	intercession (for others)	(9% in 1967)	(30% in 1987)
____	meditation	(39%)	
____	autosuggestion	(8.6%)	
____	communion with inner self	(31.3% in 1967)	(88% in 1987)
____	other (describe in margin)	(2.6%)	
____	I do not find the term useful	(33.6% in 1967)	(32% in 1987)

"FULFILLING THE PROMISE" STUDY

1. Please check one of the following that best describes your theological perspective.

   ____ Humanist (46.1% in the study)

   ____ Earth/Nature centered (19.0%)

   ____ Theist (13.0%)

   ____ Christian (9.5%)

   ____ Mystic (6.2%)

   ____ Buddhist (3.6%)

   ____ Jewish (1.3%)

   ____ Hindu (0.4%)

   ____ Moslem (0.1%)

   ____ Other (13.3%)

2. Personal Reflection: Write your understanding of God or Ultimate Reality using the following questions:

   a. Is Ultimate Reality supernatural or natural?

   b. Is it benign, indifferent, malign?

   c. Does it have a "will"? Purpose? Direction?

   d. Is it personal, supra-personal, or impersonal? If personal, does it have gender?

   e. Do you have communication with this reality? If so, how?

   f. How does this reality relate to you? Function in your life?

   g. What name or symbol do you give to it?

   h. Is there an "Ultimate Reality"?

3. Which of the following quotes about God and Ultimate Reality comes closest to your own view?

   ____ "It is madness to wear ladies'. . . hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return."—Annie Dillard

____ "But when I say 'God,' it is poetry and not theology. Nothing that any theologian ever wrote about God has helped me much, but everything that the poets have written about flowers, and birds, and skies, and seas, and the saviors of the race, and God . . . has at one time or another reached my soul. More and more, as I grow older, I live in the lovely thought of these seers and prophets. The theologians gather dust upon the shelves of my library, but the poets are stained with my fingers and blotted with my tears. I never seem so near truth as when I care not what I think or believe, but only with these masters of inner vision would live forever."—John Haynes Holmes

____ "If there were no God, it would be necessary to invent him. . . . God created man in his own image and man returned the compliment."—Voltaire

____ "The Great Surmise says simply this: At the heart of all creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, to which we shall at last return. And this is the supreme reality of our lives."—Carl Scovel

____ "Even if I think it is God that I obey, it is I who decided that it was God who spoke to me."—Jean Paul Sartre

____ "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. . . . Yeah, . . . God ain't a he or a she, but a it."—Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

____ "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."—Dag Hammarskjöld

____ "As for gods, I do not know whether they exist or not. Life is too short for such difficult inquiries."—Protagoras

____ "God is not a symbol of power over [humanity] but of [humanity's] own powers."—Erich Fromm

____ "For God is nothing other than the eternally creative source of our relational power, our common strength, a god whose movement is to empower, bringing us into our own together, a god whose name in history is love."—Carter Heyward

____ "You must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even the word itself."—Paul Tillich

____ "Why indeed must 'God' be a noun? Why not a verb—the most active and dynamic of all?"—Mary Daly

— "Religion lies in the sense of reverence, not its object. Reality is infinitely more important than its explanation."—Clarence R. Skinner

— "It is rumored that God the father is dead. Probably he couldn't stand the boredom of retirement. Mother Earth still lives and keeps busy. Her health is not what it once was, but vital signs remain strong. Women, on the average, outlive men."—from *Trilogy*: REACH, Department of Education and Social Concern, Unitarian Universalist Association, June 1974.

— "Just as a circle embraces all that is within it, so does the Godhead embrace all. No one has the power to divide this circle, to surpass it, or to limit it."—Hildegarde of Bingen