

WHAT DO I BELIEVE ABOUT GOD?

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By Liz James

The question read: What is your theological perspective?

Actually, it read: In a nutshell, what is your theological perspective? What are your personal beliefs?

The career assessment center, for whom, I was filling out these forms, is there to guide people who are planning to train for ministry. I knew from the phrasing of the question, that they must not get a lot of Unitarians. If they did, the phrase "In a nutshell" would be written in bold. And the electronic form would have a word limit beyond which it would reject further typing.

So, I sat back, closed my eyes, and tried to think how I would describe my beliefs. What do I know about God?

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I am twelve years old, in a sea of hundreds of devout Christians, aware that this is a pivotal moment in my life. I remember everything about the moment that I stood up to accept Jesus into my life--I remember the lamps in the room, the colour of the walls, the music, and the face of my Grandfather. I remember us all standing on the threshold of heaven together. I remember running into the night into a field, and laying on the grass looking into the night sky. Every star is there to meet me. I can feel God in every pore of my skin, and I know I will never be without him again. In this moment, this is what I know about God. I am certain.

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I am fifteen years old, and have been walking intimately with God for several years now. As is the custom of my religion, I pray five times a day, read my bible twice, attend church three times a week, do not cut my hair, wear makeup, or watch television. I try very hard to be-loving in everything I do--but I forget sometimes.

It is the issue of homosexuality that I trip on first. At this time in my life, I don't know of anyone who is gay, personally, and I am quite certain that I won't be. But, if God is all loving... ...I turn this over in my mind like a mobius strip, and keep examining it for a way out. I am warned that once you start to question any part of God's plans, doubts overtake you--spreading through your clarity of faith like a spider web of cracks on punctured glass. I am warned that some thoughts are best avoided--and indeed, I find out that this is true. Within a couple of years, I am without faith. What do I know about God? I know that God is like a shadow. Too much light, from the wrong angle, makes him fade away.

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I am in my early twenties, at a social event for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered University students, with a gay friend, who didn't want to go alone for his first time. I am having a great time with these people--who form an instant community of shared experience, and invite me into that intimacy. They are authentic, funny, and warm. They approach the struggles of their lives with spirit and humility. Suddenly, I am hit by a Realization. *Everyone here thinks I am a lesbian.*

My first thought is that I must correct this oversight *immediately*. I have a sudden urgency that approaches panic. But I am hung up on the technicalities of how exactly I would do this. Stand up and

say "may I have everyone's attention please"? Maybe write "not a lesbian" on my name tag? How do I say I am not a lesbian without implying that I think people *ought not to be* lesbians? How do I say I am not a lesbian, without implying that my heterosexuality is really, really important to me? I feel miserable, trapped, and completely alone in the world.

On the way home, I share my secret trauma with my friend. He says nothing for a minute. Mature as he is, he resists what must have been an overpowering urge to say "You poor thing--dealing with that for *one evening of your entire life...*"

"Why did you feel the need to correct that perception?" he asks me.

"I'm not homophobic." I answer.

"I wasn't saying you are." he says. Slowly, it begins to dawn on me that he might have some insights into this issue.

"Does it bother you when people think you're straight?" I start to ask all my gay friends. Some say yes. Some say they've never cared. A lot say that it used to bother them, but over the years their sexuality doesn't define them as much, so it doesn't matter whether people misperceive it. Some say it depends on the context. Most of them respond with a certain emotional tone--a kind of combination between resignation, maturity, depth, and complexity. I start to get the feeling that the shared experience of this community has something to teach me. Not about sexuality. About living.

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I am twenty three.

What do I know about God? I know that God doesn't exist. I know God is an invention to comfort and control--and that it is clung to by the weak and irrational. I know that replacing illogical beliefs with logical ones will dramatically improve our world. I am part of an enlightenment--a human evolution, if you will.

And how does one best spread such a Gospel? In one's better moments, with logic. In one's weaker moments, with derision. At that time, for me, Atheism's Gospel was best framed and explained by what it defended you from. It is through this passion that I came to find myself at a protest rally against the Promise Keepers.

Promise Keepers are a right wing men's religious group--who at the time had become quite politically active in ways that were disturbing to me. They were planning a meeting, and a corresponding protest was being set up outside. My soon-to-be step kids and I were going--we would stand up to defend truth together. This is what *real* family values are.

It was a sunny November morning at around seven when we drove up. Promise Keepers are early risers, and I had had to entice the boys with commitments of McDonalds drive-through to get them out of bed. When we arrived, a very nice lady with a megaphone explained the fundamental rules of these kinds of protests to us--stay with the group, only engage in conversation with a buddy pair--stuff like that. I repeated the lecture verbatim to the boys three times to make sure they understood about the importance of Safety in the Presence of the Enemy. They showed their comprehension of the situation by nodding gravely and asking if they could have some of the Tim Bits from the protesters' coffee stand.

They showed their understanding of the issues by choosing a sign that read “I’m queer and I’m here”. I explained about patriarchy and human rights and civil disobedience and supporting the oppressed and each other. They asked *how many* Tim Bits they were allowed to have.

We sang songs making fun of the Promise Keepers—singing “Promise Keeper Blues” and “Gary had a Little Wife”. We also marched in circles yelling “shame” at the people going in. Some of the promise keepers would stop to yell and shake their fists and tell us we needed to get saved, but mostly they passed us with a glazed amused kind of look. I had a growing sense of unease, marching in a circle determinedly, trying not to meet the eyes of any of the enemy as they went in.

The worst moment of the entire protest was when a promise keeper walked right up to me—I braced myself, and my buddies each put a supporting arm on my back just like we were told to, in case he started yelling. He looked at the sign I’d chosen, very carefully, and asked me “Can you *define* the word misogynist?”

I paused

I looked at my buddies.

They didn’t know either, but they patted my back supportively.

“It means, um, kind of like patriarchal and fundamentalist and homophobic?” I said. He smiled and walked away. I went to sit by myself for a while and think.

Later, I wound up talking to a man who was standing alone, sipping coffee, and watching us march in circles. When I walked up to him, he smiled and sighed and said “I don’t think anything is being accomplished here”. Even though I knew he was from the Enemy Camp, I shut my mouth and listened to him anyways. .

I learned from this man that he felt lost, and looked to the Promise Keepers as a source of values in a world that he felt was crumbling. He felt a lack of role models, in our society, for what it means to be a good man. He felt supported by the Promise Keepers in caring for his wife in a relationship that works for both of them. He was interested in my concerns regarding the increasing political force of the group, but didn’t see them as racist or anti-gay. Another Promise Keeper, joining the discussion, brainstormed with us ways that the leadership of the group might address the actions of some of its prominent members. We all wondered why those actions hadn’t been publicly denounced by the movement as a whole. Of all of the interactions I had that day, this was the only one that felt real--like all of us came away somehow wiser. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

I drove away that day deeply rattled, explaining to my sister “They had some good things to say, too, you know. But I just can’t merge the good things with some of the horrible things.” I wiped McDonald’s paraphernalia away from the gear shift and continued: “Like their values and how they live--they make a lot of mistakes. They’re still wrong.”

At this moment, my cell phone rang. It was the boys. It turns out they had been listening to my lectures about staying together as a group and safety in protest situations, because they were able to fire them all back at me when I forgot them at the rally.

To which I responded, "Please tell me you aren't calling from a promise keeper's phone..."

That night I couldn't sleep. How could I teach my kids good values when I was so deeply flawed myself? How could I find the deep certainty I needed to be a good mother? It was these thoughts that led me to the Unitarian Center.

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"We welcome you as you are, with your doubts, as well as your convictions. With your hopes, and your fears. Whatever your faith, whatever your heritage, whomever you love. Today, you are a part of our religious community".

I am twenty three, and I am hearing the words of the Unitarian Congregation of Saskatoon's Welcome for the first time. My eyes are filling with tears.

I lean over to my then fiancé, unable to contain myself, and whisper "I can be a Minister after all--I can be a Unitarian Minister!"

He whispers back "Can we talk about this later?"

I am bursting with joy in that moment. I have always had deep longing for church, but couldn't go to one without pretending to be something I am not. Without living a life filled with footnotes.

I scan the principles one more time, and I am certain. I know that this is my religious home, because there is nothing here that I disagree with. For years, I work tirelessly, inspired by a vision of a safe space where you can be honest and you can be home. For years, I am urged on by my awareness of the people who are out there alone--seeking freedom of religious thought and a spiritual community, and believing that they must choose between the two. For years, I work towards a vision of a space where you don't have to pretend to believe something.

It is almost ten years before I realize the absurdity of building a religion based on what *isn't* there.

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I am 32 years old, sitting in a worship service at Meadville Lombard Theological Seminary. The chaplain begins the closing prayer with "Our Heavenly Father..." The discomfort that has been with me throughout the whole service--one that is a beautiful and deep portrayal of Unitarian Universalist Theism--intensifies in this moment. Did he just address a prayer to "Our Heavenly Father?"

Really? *Our Heavenly Father*? That guy should not be allowed to say that here. Not without a disclaimer. *Everyone will think we're all Theists...*

...Not that there's anything wrong with being a Theist... ...I'm just not one. For a moment, the face of my gay friend hovers in my memory.

It's not the wording of his prayer that bothers me, I realize, it's the absence of my story during my overall experience at Meadville. It's like how, on Valentines' day, the world explodes with love stories and none of them are about same sex couples. It's not any one story that bothers me about that holiday--it's what's *not* there.

But how would I tell my story of being an Atheist? I'm not even sure I would call myself an Atheist anymore--I would say I don't believe in God, but... The term Atheists conjures up visions of Dawkins and Hitchkins and I know that isn't my story. What am I?

The very word -Atheist. It's a tragedy in itself, isn't it? What if the woman's movement had made do with the word "not male" as it's only descriptor of the experience of being female? What if the gay community adopted the term Heterosexually Challenged?

And if I say "I'm an Atheist" that's not my story, because it's not the kernel of whom I am. To shout that from the rooftops would be like shouting "I'm a heterosexual". Neither one is at the heart of my identity. It would be a declaration of truth, and a lie, at the same time.

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A week later, and I am at a Sunday Services workshop with our new Minister, Karen. We have a flip chart up, and we are talking about our level of comfort with words. There are two columns--good words, and bad words. I am finding this task very hard.

And Karen names the heart of our difficulty: "It's not about the word itself, it's about the context surrounding it. To use the term Worship or Atheist is not nearly so powerful as to use the two in combination. When we use one alone, we might be able to portray one kind of Unitarian. But when we use them together, we unleash the true potential of our movement--to create definitions and thoughts and perspectives that connect rather than divide."

I think for a moment of an ad I saw once, that said "We support family values." Underneath it was a picture of a gay couple, laughing and playing with their two children. If it was just the phrase "we support family values" it would have been a misrepresentation of its authors. If it was just a picture of the gay couple, it wouldn't have been quite so powerful. It's the spot where we the two met that allowed the beginning of reclaiming the phrase "family values". And it's those kinds of spaces where I believe Unitarian Universalism finds its spark.

I realize that my story is not held in any word, but in the relationships between them. "I'm an Atheist" doesn't tell the right story. "I pray" is also a factually accurate statement for me, and it also doesn't tell the right story. But, "I'm an Atheist who prays" says something much more accurate--not just about Atheism and prayer, but about how for me an essential principle of my religious life is that not everything has to line up rationally. I can pray without an audience--I sing all the time when nobody's there to hear me. I have four kids--I am used to speaking and knowing that nobody will listen.

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What do I believe about God(s)?

Well, if we are referring to a bearded white guy on the clouds, or even any kind of sentient supernatural creature, I don't believe in his/her/or their material existence. But I do believe God exists as a powerful creature in the minds and hearts of millions of people.

But let's take a second look at what we mean by God. Let's say I asked you to write a computer program to sort pictures of objects into "chair" and "not chair", using rules for what a chair looks like. It sounds easy, until you realize that there are dining chairs, chaise lounges, bean bag chairs, and Japanese sitting cushions. If it were me, I would define "chair" not as "four legs and a seat" but as "an object people sit

on". My computer program would do a better job of including things like bean bag chairs, but it would also include things like rocks, tree stumps, and parents of small children. We're both wrong--we're just wrong differently.

When I think of God, I define God from the "how is it used" perspective, rather than the "what does it look like" perspective. You see, there are a set of questions: How did we get here? What happens after we die? How does the universe work? What's the meaning? How do we get people to do the "right thing"? How do we decide what the right thing is?

I believe that God, and Gods, Goddesses, Spirits, and so on developed throughout the ages as different forms of answers to those questions. I believe the scientist who describes new discoveries about DNA as nothing less than "looking into the face of God" doesn't mean that they believe God's face has a double helix formation. They are describing looking at part of the answers to those big religious questions. They use the phrase God in its most broad terms--like the definition of chair as "what you sit on". The same questions that were answered by Yahweh and Allah and the Goddess and the Tao and Enlightenment are also answered by gazing into the building blocks of the universe. So, personally, I find it more helpful to define God not as a set of characteristics--such as being supernatural, or male, or being worshipped--because I feel that definition misses things. When I'm thinking to myself, I define God as however a person answers those big questions of life. When I'm talking to others, I don't do this--not unless I have the opportunity to clarify, like I do today. I know that I need a new word--but please bear with me.

I believe that there is, in fact, only one factually correct answer to the questions of how the Universe works, and I believe that it doesn't involve a creator. But this point is academic because we will never grasp the answer in their entirety. The mysteries of the Universe are so vast and so intricate at the same time that our minds are incapable of ever even coming to an approximation of whatever that deep truth might be. We are like a river trying to map itself. To put the same point into more religious language, using a traditional definition of God, of course we don't understand God. How could we possibly--it's GOD.

So what do I believe about God? I believe that I am wrong about God. My answers are flawed, incomplete, and partial. That's what I am certain about, about God.

Today!

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I didn't write that on the form. It would have been too hard to explain my definition of God and the whole chair thing.

Also, I happened to re-read the question. I was never asked what I believe about God. I was asked: *What is your theological perspective? What are your personal beliefs?*

If I were asked "What do you believe about marriage" I would not answer the question "Are you gay or straight?" Why did I jump to the God answer in my mind so fast?

What is your theological perspective? What are your personal beliefs?

Take a minute to think about how you would answer that question. The Oxford English dictionary definition of theology starts with the study of a male God, and then goes on to include study of

Paganism, “Non-Christian” perspectives, Liberation Theology, Metaphysics, and the “Theology of Hope”. They are long on examples and short on actual definition. Clearly, they didn’t know how to describe the chair either.

So what if I asked you to tell me about your theological perspective, asking you to tell me how you answer the questions traditionally answered by God? What if I asked you to tell me about your values, beliefs, how you make meaning, and how you choose to live your life--starting with what is most central and most important. What would you say?

I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people--for me this means that *everyone* deserves certain rights and to have their comfort and happiness taken into account. I believe that we have no evidence of God or an afterlife--but that since those aren't exactly scientific questions, examining the evidence kind of misses the point. I believe that religion is better understood as a poem or a symphony than as a mathematical textbook, and I do not ask my religious life to be logical. By the same token, I wouldn't use it to set a bone or dock a space shuttle. Give unto science that which is science, and give unto God that which is God's.

I believe that we are in grave danger from certain belief systems--those characterized by a fundamentalist and dogmatic perspective that defines all others as "enemy" and seeks to conquer and convert them. I do not believe that fundamentalism is exclusive to one religion or even to religion in general--it is characterized not by what a belief is, but by the way in which it is rigidly held and promoted. I believe that fundamentalist systems thrive on opposition--and that arguing with fundamentalist views is like attempting to put out a fire with gasoline. The only effective tool we have in facing them are communication, understanding our similarities, and good character. It has been my experience that this intersection can be a fight or a dance--and when I use questions to start dancing, the other party responds by softening as well.

I believe that commercials are to the soul what cigarettes are to the lungs--and actively work to combat the modern value system of more-is-better. I believe that more stuff, more choices, and more information are all potentially damaging in serious ways. I believe that what you subtract is often more important than what you add.

I believe people move towards light, not away from darkness--and so I look for the good to emphasize. I believe that hope requires discipline, and that sadness is an important part of life. I believe that nearly everything is best viewed as a system--and so I always ask "What happened before/after?" "What happened elsewhere? I believe that “How is it used?” is a more important question than “What is it?”

I believe that in the moment when I feel like nobody sees my point of view, I do not need a better way of expressing myself--I need a better way of listening. I believe that we should be excited to discover we are wrong. I do believe that certainty is not indication of correctness, nor is it a prerequisite to action. I believe that openness and courage can change the world. In the same way that Forgiveness is central to Christianity, and Mindfulness is central to Buddhism, Compassionate Curiosity is central to my religious life.

What would you write?