

God, Worship, and The Tyranny of Intimacy **By David Bumbaugh**

When I joined the faculty of Meadville Lombard Theological School in January of 1999, following four decades of service in the parish, I was given the rare gift of time to reflect on what seems to be happening within Unitarian Universalism as fashions change and enthusiasms drift across our movement. My visits to a variety of congregations and my conversations with lay people, ministers and students leads me to believe that a significant theological shift is taking place among us--a shift which I believe radically challenges the way in which we understand ourselves and the nature of the religious venture.

Let me say at the outset that I approach this topic with more than a little uneasiness. From our position here in the middle of this history, it is not always possible to know whether what we are observing represents a long-term trend or is only a small blip in an otherwise undisturbed trajectory--whether indeed the sky is falling or it is just another acorn. However, at the risk of making too much of a small thing, I would like to spend my time with you today exploring the nature of the shift I have detected and some of its implications for the future of Unitarian Universalism.

I am not the only person, and certainly not the first to note that something significant has been happening to the way we understand ourselves and the nature of religious community. For sometime now we have been aware of new elements, new attitudes, new behaviors, new expectations arising with the Unitarian Universalist community. As is often the case when something unfamiliar emerges within a human society, we attempt to understand it, engage it, structure it using familiar terms and categories. We look back to our past and try to find some process, some framework, some precedent which will help understand what is happening to us. And that is largely how Unitarian Universalists have been responding to the theological shift which is manifesting itself among us.

Looking to our immediate past for models, some have defined the contemporary conflicts among us as the recurrence of the struggle between Humanists and Theists, or the reemergence of an even older struggle between the Unitarian and Universalists Christians and those who envisioned the future of the two movements in terms that were larger than Christianity. Thus, if you listen carefully to what is being said among us, you may hear ministers talking about how difficult they find it to respond to the needs and expectations of newer, younger members who are seeking a deepened spirituality in light of the fact that so many of the "old humanists" still clutter up the pews and sit on important committees and will not tolerate new language or new sensibilities. Or you may hear long-time members of congregations grouching about how their church is being stolen from them as they witness the return of the Christian language and symbolism from which they had extracted themselves with so much pain and at so much cost.

I would like to suggest to you that these categories of struggle--Humanist-Theist; Christian-non-Christian--are familiar terms which are ready at hand as we attempt to understand what is happening, but, in fact, they do not fully fit the circumstances and may, in fact, hide more than they reveal, blinding us to a wider dimension. I would submit that what is happening among us is but our version of a much larger shift that is occurring in religious thought and

practice throughout the western world. In his book, *WHEN GOD BECOMES GODDESS*, Richard Grigg suggests that religion in the west is at a moment of deep transition, a transition caused by more than the generational differences and styles some observers have recognized.

Grigg reminds us that one of the persistent issues confronting monotheistic religions historically has been the problem of theodicy--the difficulty of squaring the reality of evil and suffering with faith in an omnipotent, omniscient God. Grigg outlines some of the conventional ways this problem has been dealt with, but he suggests that over the course of the past half century all of those traditional responses to the problem have been overwhelmed by the globalization of suffering. He suggests that the revolution in communications has confronted conventional theological assertions with a flood tide of misery--an inescapable almost visceral awareness of the vast extent and determined persistence of suffering and evil. On any given day, we are bombarded with reports of terrorist attacks on innocent populations, of famine and pestilence, of earthquake and floods and drought, of governmental outrages, and of random acts of senseless violence here, there and around the planet. It is no longer possible to respond to this experience with the Joban platitude that God's ways are not our ways and the implied faith that somewhere there is a plan which will explain and justify all the suffering, so that all will come out right in the end and the charge of moral malfeasance at the heart of existence can be dismissed. It is no longer possible to watch the haunted eyes of innocent children starving in the midst of plenty and affirm the existence of a loving, omnipotent God.

What is more, says Grigg, the triumphs of science have compounded the theological problem. Over the last century we have seen instance after instance in which human science has given us tools to do what, for centuries, God either could not or would not do. For generations, prayers to God went unanswered while children died of Polio or of smallpox. Then, suddenly, science told us how to prevent these and other ancient scourges. In light of that fact, what does it mean that God appeared impotent while human science found a way? One can argue that God only works through human beings, but after a while that explanation wears thin, and one finds oneself wondering how to affirm a loving, omniscient God who either didn't care, or wasn't as wise as Jonas Salk.

The effect of this growing problem of theodicy, of the inescapable awareness of evil has been to eviscerate the long cherished notion of a creator God who manages the world with loving competence. However, the fact that many people can no longer affirm this kind of God only serves to compound, in many cases, a sense of isolation and cosmic loneliness. And so, for people who cannot accept the existentialist, atheistic alternative, a quite different understanding of God has begun to appear in place of the traditional God.

The God who is emerging in contemporary thought, suggests Grigg, is a limited God, not omnipotent, not omniscient, not the cosmic CEO, but also not the impersonal God of Deism. Rather this is a God who can be relied on to provide strength to human beings in times of trouble and pain, in moments of sorrow and despair. This God is a source of power into which human beings may tap when their resources have grown thin and unreliable, when pain and confusion threaten to overwhelm them. This is the God of twelve step programs--a God who seems impotent in the face of self-destructive behavior--who cannot stop or prevent addictions or other

self-defeating actions--but who represents a power greater than individual will, able to support and under gird personal efforts.

This God does not have the ability to intervene in the working of the larger world; this God does not have the ability to end pain and misery; this God cannot take from us whatever bitter cup is pressed to our lips; this God cannot abolish the death camps or end the suffering of the innocent. What this God can do is strengthen us in our suffering, be with us with us in our pain, encourage us in our times of despair, and weep with us in our moments of deep sorrow and loss. This is a very limited God, a kind of personal daemon who will share our trials and tribulations, and who ensures that our suffering and grief do not go unnoticed. We are no longer sure where to locate this God, or how to describe this God--whether as a power outside of us or a power within us, a personified mode of existence or a process at work in the world. Nonetheless, this rather modest God, who more accurately reflects our experience in the world, and who responds to our personal need for companionship has driven out the God who was the omni-competent creator and manager of the universe.

Grigg suggests that throughout the western world, increasingly it is not the God of power, "Immortal, Invisible, God only wise" who is being invoked by religious people. Rather, he suggests it is the God of the still small voice, the God who, "When other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless [will] abide with me." I suspect that this is the God who is increasingly referenced in the revived theistic language being used in our congregations these days.

While this God seems to be very personal, very much like a household God, the God ensconced on personal altars in bedrooms and meditation rooms, Grigg suggests there is also a corporate quality to this God. Citing the influence of feminist theologians and the emergence of Goddess worship, he indicates that the corporate aspect of the God who is emerging is not the King, Lord, Father God who is out there, separate and apart from the world, but rather the divine spirit which is evoked in our coming together and which emerges in our relationships with one another and with the rest of creation. Grigg refers to this as *enactment* theology. By this he means that God does not have a separate existence apart from the relational community in which the sacred is enacted. And so, in our coming together, in the symbiotic relationship in which something arises which is more than the sum of its parts, God emerges, is enacted, is called into being. This is a transpersonal God; the sacred matrix out of which this God emerges is relational and the qualities and nature of this God depend upon the nature and quality of the relationship.

Again, I would argue that this is the kind of theism that seems to be finding voice within our congregations. It is a far cry from the theism against which the Humanist Manifesto reacted in 1933. It is Christian only in the sense that it carries the flavoring and the tint of having arisen in a Christian context. Clearly our predecessors who struggled over how and whether to maintain the Christian witness within Unitarianism and Universalism would scarcely recognize it as Christian. To attempt to explore the new theological landscape using the old maps of the Humanist-Theist or Christian-Non-Christian controversies is to misread the territory and to misunderstand the challenges this emergent theology presents.

There is much about this theological posture that is attractive. It avoids the theistic triumphalism that has often resulted in intolerance and persecution of unorthodox position. It is difficult to imagine the personal helper God instigating a crusade or justifying an inquisition. It is difficult to imagine such a God going to war with science. And certainly it is difficult to envision the transpersonal God of enactment theology as a God of storm and battle. The God we invoke at our personal altars and the God we enact together in community is a resource, a strength in time of trouble, a companion on life's journey, not the jealous God who brooks no rivals nor the warrior God who casts out the unbeliever and destroys the unfaithful.

However, this is not to suggest that there are not negative aspects of this theological transformation. If it is difficult to imagine the personal God worshipped at our private altars as hostile or angry, it is equally difficult to imagine that God inspiring prophetic vision or strong public ministry. Indeed this limited "God with us" may encourage us to seek ways to be in solidarity with those who suffer, ways to suffer with them, or to ease their suffering. But this "God with us" seems unable to provoke or sustain a demand for structural change or to inspire a public crusade in behalf of a just social order.

One might hope that the transpersonal God of enactment theology might be more effective in this area. Indeed, Grigg suggests that the God who emerges in relationship has the potential for a much-enlarged arena of action and influence. If God emerges in our relationships, and represents the corporate power that resides in the space between I and thou, between me and the other, between us and the world, then, in theory, there is no limit upon the scope of this sacred power. The God who is enacted among us is as large and powerful as the range and scope of our relationships, and is, in fact, limited only by the dimensions of the largest sense of self we can imagine and sustain and the widest web of relationships we can envision.

But while the God of enactment theology, the sacred reality evoked by our genuine interactions and acknowledged relationships need not be limited, in truth we increasingly circumscribe the size and scope of our relationships until the enacted God is revealed to be a small and puny thing. I would submit to you that increasingly Unitarian Universalists are defining religious community in terms of intimacy and as a consequence we have permitted the vision of a larger arena of moral action and religious responsibility to weaken. The inevitable consequence is a lessened sense of what is possible, to whom or what we are responsible, and of the meaning of our own existence. Increasingly we are encapsulated within the narrow confines of intimate community and when this trend is joined to the new theology, the God who is enacted by us turns out to be little more than a team mascot.

Edwin Wilson's hymn asked "Where is our holy church?" and answered that question with this affirmation: "A mighty host respond, the people rise in every land to break the captive's bond." This is a vision of the religious institution which escapes parochialism, which is open to diverse ways of engaging the sacred, which takes seriously the stranger, the one who shares a prophetic imperative but who may never attend our worship service or be a visitor to our church building or settle into our community. But increasingly, Chris Raible's parody of Wilson's hymn seems more appropriate to what we are becoming. Chris wrote, "Where is our holy church, we only wish we knew. It might be those now gathered here, except we are so few."

In recent years, we have walked away from the understanding of the church as a public institution with a public responsibility, and have begun to embrace metaphors like church as family, and church as caring community, metaphors that reek of what one author calls "the tyranny of intimacy." Behind this change is the assumption that real religion happens in small groups, in face-to-face interaction with those who know our pain and share our joys and understand our delights and despairs and are prepared to reveal themselves to us. In this view, it is the function of real religion to build the structures of mutual support that are missing in so much of our corporate lives and to encourage us to encounter each other intimately. In our worship, we focus on the modest joys and personal pains of the women and men who comprise the congregation. In our committee meetings and our educational offerings, much time is consumed with a curious kind of forced sharing called a check-in. Few of us seem to understand how great a redirection of the focus and the purpose of the church this represents.

What is missing in this approach to religion is any deep or genuine appreciation of the larger world that is symbolized by the stranger among us--the person who is not part of our intimate community of sharing, but whose insight and concern might preserve us from a kind of narrow narcissistic intimacy. What is missing in this approach to religion is any sense of the church as a public institution, in which the focus is broader than our immediate itches and personal scratches and which seeks to lift us out of our little local universes and into a world of over-arching concerns and responsibilities. What is missing in this approach to religion is an understanding that the circle of relationship out of which a genuine sense of the sacred might be enacted must be broader than those who sit knee to knee with us in our circle of intimacy, but must also include the stranger we pass in the street, the women and men who will never sit in a circle with us, the woman or man who wanders into our church but is not willing to submit to the tyranny of intimacy which rigidly defines the boundaries of our institutional culture. What is missing in this approach to religion is an understand that the job of the church is to lift us out of dumb fascination with ourselves and into a responsible engagement with a broken and bleeding world.

Focusing, as we do, upon community, we do not value the stranger; we make no room for the stranger, except as the stranger is willing to abandon that role and to be inducted into our community. We see little value in communication with those who do not share an intimate relationship with us. Public conversation has little value as we embrace intimacy as a spiritual vehicle. Where once we believed that the church had a moral obligation to address the larger world and to prepare its people to work for the salvation of that world, we now believe that the job of the church is to respond to the personal problems people bring to the community and we count it a success if we can make people feel a little bit better about themselves as they go out the door.

There are any numbers of rituals that have emerged within our corporate worship that demonstrate this shift in focus. Perhaps the most obvious is the ritual lighting of candles of joys and concerns--a practice which has swept our churches in recent years. The theory seems to be that if we can share our personal triumphs and tragedies we will strengthen the bonds of intimacy and, therefore, the sacred that is enacted among us will be more powerfully sustaining for us as we cope with the challenges and conflicts of our personal lives. That assumption may be right, but what a shrunken vision of the religious venture such a theory represents. In practice it often

results in a kind of inward looking attitude, and I fear that the God enacted by such a ritual often turns out to be the tribal God of this gathering of people.

As we light our candles and detail our triumphs and tragedies, there is a clear albeit unspoken message communicated by the ritual. That message is that the stranger is welcome among us only if she or he is prepared to be adopted into our tribe, if she or he is willing to adopt the practices of the tribe, to become our intimates. And then our God becomes his or her God. But if the stranger chooses to remain a stranger, we have no real vehicle of engagement with that person, for our rituals do not affirm that interaction with the stranger has any value. Strangers are affirmed to the degree that they show potential for becoming one of us. And thus, by our ritual behavior, the God, the sacred which we enact among us is tame and domesticated and limited by our inability to envision a public dimension to religious relationship--a dimension which would embrace those with whom we are intimate and share rituals and assumptions and those who are and remain strangers to us, but who, with us, constitute the larger community.

This was not always the case. In many churches there once was a feature of the Sunday service that was called Congregational response, Congregational Conversation, or less felicitously, Congregational Talkback. It was a symbolic act, as are virtually all elements of a worship service. But what it symbolized was a willingness to engage in a public conversation. What it telegraphed was that the service was not a unidirectional communication from pulpit to pew, nor was the dialogue to be defined as intimate sharing. Rather, the Sunday service was a public event, in which members of our families, those we know intimately, those we know less well, those who are strangers were welcomed to participate because all of these are part of the circle of relationship out of which our understanding of the holy emerges and in terms of which the sacred is enacted among us.

Worship is not the only place where the consequences of the new theism, based as it is in intimacy, can be seen. It can be seen dramatically in our evolving understanding of social action or social justice work. Once upon a time we understood it to be the responsibility of the church to speak truth to power, to expose the underlying assumptions and conventional behaviors which generate injustice and suffering, to call society as a whole and ourselves individually to confront the distance between our professed values and our policies and practices and seek to remove the causes of injustice and misery. As the new theism has arisen among us, a new sense of what is called "social justice work" has emerged. Just as the God of the new theism is a limited "God with us," sharer of our burdens and our sorrows, so we have limited our sense of what is required of us. We have given up the dream of a renewed society, in which justice would roll down like waters and mercy like a never failing stream, and have settled, instead for ways to be in solidarity with those who are victims of an unjust social order, and for programs which will ameliorate pain while giving us a sense of satisfaction and of immediate gratification. Just as "God with us" is unable to end pain but can provide support to us in our pain, so we have surrendered the dream that we might build a just society and have settled for supporting and being with those who suffer the consequences of injustice.

On the associational level, a similar kind of refocusing can be seen if we think for a moment about the events which occurred at the General Assembly the last time we met in Cleveland--in 1968. I remember that assembly. There was much pain and anger and frustration

and excitement about the emergence of the Black Affairs Council and the demands it made upon the Association. But the quarrel was focused on how we might use our resources to address the root causes of racial injustice in society at large. Contrast that with the current UUA anti-racism initiatives, which seem to be focused on the notion that the primary arena of action is internal and personal. We must grapple with our own racism, inherited because of our position in a fallen society, and only then may we discover how to be in true solidarity with the victims of racism. The dream of a redeemed social order has receded until it is as distant as the second coming and the New Jerusalem.

I began by suggesting that a significant theological shift is occurring within contemporary Unitarian Universalism. We misunderstand that shift if we think of it in terms of Theism and Humanism, or Christian and non-Christian. What is happening is a privatizing of religion, a domesticating of the sacred, a tribalizing of the holy, a long, slow retreat from the dream of "a world made fair and all her people one." For some of us, at least, it is this refocusing of the religious venture upon intimate rather than public relationships which is the source of conflict and which I, at least, fear will end by trivializing the entire religious enterprise.