

# *God Reconsidered*

A Sermon Delivered on November 8, 2009  
by  
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

*“Canst thou by searching find out God?”  
-- Job 11:7*

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**Meditation** by the Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Jacob Trapp “To Worship”

To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars,  
Before a flower, a leaf in sun light, or a grain of sand  
To worship is to be silent, receptive, before a tree astir with the wind,  
Or the passing shadow of a cloud.  
To worship is to work with dedication and skill;  
It is to pause from work and listen to a strain of music.  
To worship is to sing with the singing beauty of the earth;  
It is to listen through a storm to the still small voice within.  
Worship is loneliness seeking communion;  
It is a thirsty land crying out for rain.  
Worship is the kindred fire within our hearts;  
It moves through deeds of kindness and through acts of love.  
Worship is the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond...

**Reading:** by Robert Wright from *The Evolution of God* (p. 29)

There is in the world today a great and mysterious force that shapes the fortunes of millions of people. It is called the stock market. There are people who claim to have special insights into this force. They are called stock analysts. Most of them have often been wrong about the markets future behavior, and many of them have been wrong most of the time. In fact, it's not clear that their advice is worth anything at all. Reputable economists have argued that you're better off picking stocks randomly than seeking guidance from stock analysts; either way it's the blind leading the blind, but in one case you don't have to pay a commission.

Nonetheless, stock analysis is a profitable line of work, even for some manifestly inept practitioners. Why? Because whenever people sense the presence of a puzzling and momentous force, they want to believe there is a way to comprehend it. If you can convince them that you're the key to comprehension, you can reach great stature.

This fact has deeply shaped the evolution of religion, and it seems to have done so since very near the beginning.

**Reading:** by Karen Armstrong from *The Case for God* (p. ix)

We are talking far too much about God these days, and what we say is often facile (trivial and superficial). In our democratic society, we think that the concept of God *should* be easy and that religion ought to be readily accessible to anybody... Surely everybody knows what God is: the Supreme Being, a divine Personality, who created the world and everything in it. They look perplexed if you point out that it is inaccurate to call God the Supreme Being because God is not *a* being at all, and that we really don't understand what we mean when we say that [God] is “good,” “wise,” or “intelligent.” People of faith admit in theory that God is utterly transcendent, but they seem sometimes to assume that *they* know exactly who “he” is and what he thinks, loves, and expects... We

regularly ask God to bless our nation, save our queen, cure our sickness, or give us a fine day for the picnic. We remind God that he has created the world and that we are miserable sinners, as though this may have slipped his mind. Politicians quote God to justify their policies, teachers use him to keep order in the classroom, and terrorists commit atrocities in his name...

...Despite our scientific and technological brilliance, our religious thinking is sometimes remarkably undeveloped, even primitive.

**Reading:** by Annie Dillard from *For the Time Being* (p. 165, 167)

Who is dead? The Newtonian God, some call that tasking and antiquated figure who haunts children and repels strays, who sits on the throne of judgment frowning and figuring, and who with the strength of his arms dishes out human fates, in the form of cancer or cash - to teach, dazzle, rebuke, or try us, one by one, and to punish or reward us, day by day, for our thoughts, words and deeds...

God is no more blinding people with glaucoma, or testing them with diabetes, or purifying them with spinal pain,... or fiddling with chromosomes, than he is jimmying floodwaters or pitching tornadoes at towns... The very least likely things for which God might be responsible are what insurers call "acts of God."

Then what, if anything, does he do? If God does not cause everything that happens, does God cause anything that happens? Is God completely out of the loop?

### **Reconsidering God**

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God is under attack. Were you aware of this?

For the past few years a variety of well-known authors have been publishing articles and books, in which they have thrown down the gauntlet, challenging God. Or to be more specific, they have not so much challenged God, but rather challenged the entire idea of God. They have tried to make the case that belief in God is a tragic mistake. It is an ancient human error, a remnant of out-dated superstition, sloppy philosophizing, and romantic wishful thinking.

Perhaps you have heard or read about them. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' book is entitled *The God Delusion*. The philosopher Sam Harris wrote *The End of Faith*. The neuroscientist Daniel Dennett wrote *Breaking the Spell*. And the British intellectual Christopher Hitchens authored *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. In different ways, they all make the point that the notion of God has no place in a modern secular world thoroughly enlightened by science. The fact that

none of them has been struck by a bolt of lightening as divine punishment for their blasphemies, would seem to strengthen their case for God's non-existence.

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Now, I know some of you are familiar with the points these authors make, and I know some of you agree with them. This is not surprising.

We are, after all, a religious community that includes men and women who believe in God, as well as people who don't. Sitting side by side in our pews this morning are atheists as well as theists, and a wide variety of agnostics.

And depending on the day of the week, depending on our latest experiences, the latest conversations we have had, and the latest books we have read - our understanding of God will change. And we may find ourselves moving back and forth, between the camp of believers and non-believers.

This diversity and fluidity of belief among us, does raise the question what we are doing here on Sunday mornings. We say we gather for worship, but what does that mean? According to the dictionary, worship is, above all, an act of adoration, of devotion or of respect, directed toward a diety - a god. How can we gather for communal worship, when the very act of worship may mean something very different for each of us? How can we join in worship, when we don't agree on who or what we are worshipping?

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Robert Wright's book, *The Evolution of God*, is one of the latest contributions to the public debate surrounding the meaning of God. Wright makes the point that the so-called clash between religion and science is by no means a new phenomenon. It can be traced all the way back to ancient Babylon, centuries before the Common Era. That's when people first began to realize a predictable pattern in the recurring solar eclipse. As Wright puts it, "eclipses that had long been attributed to restless and malignant supernatural beings were suddenly found to occur at predictable intervals - predictable enough to make you wonder whether restless and malignant supernatural beings were really the problem."

Wright acknowledges that religion has changed significantly over the centuries, as scientific advances have altered our understanding of how the world works. But it is important to remember that science itself has changed, too. Scientific theories established centuries ago have not remained unaltered. Newton's theories were a big improvement over Aristotle's. But the imagined absolutes of Newtonian physics were seen as relatively limited once Einstein arrived on the scene, and Einstein's theories themselves were further refined by quantum physics. The fact that science either discards old theories, or recognizes their limits, has not led us to question the value of the scientific enterprise altogether.

The fact that religious belief and practices have changed in the course of human evolution is not evidence that religion is either out-dated or disappearing. Rather it is evidence that religion is closely linked to our ongoing human and social development.

A lot has changed since humans lived in small clans of hunter-gatherers, since a band of tribes in the ancient near-east were bound together by a shared belief in a single God called Yahweh, since the followers of Jesus created a religious system that sought to embrace believers throughout the entire Holy Roman empire, and since a prophet in born in Mecca founded a faith that provided a religious vision and unifying worldview for the even larger Islamic empire, that had its Golden Age between the 8th and 13th century.

Our understanding of God and religion has changed considerably over the centuries. And yet, as Robert Wright sees it, all the world's great religions share two common themes. Religions have always sought to explain why bad things happen, and they have tried to offer ways that we can make things better.

H. L. Mencken put it concisely when he wrote, religion's "single function is to give [us] access to the powers which seem to control our destiny, and its single purpose is to induce those powers to be friendly to [us]... Nothing else is essential."

William James put it slightly differently. He said, religion "consists in the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."

Mencken and James touch on similar dual religious themes: the notion of a great power or mysterious order that governs the workings of the world, and the way humans can interact with this transcendent reality. But they have distinctly different views of how these two themes fit together. Mencken believes religion is all about the human effort to influence the gods, in some small way to change their minds so that they might be friendly and supportive to us. James believes the religious endeavor is defined by our human effort to change ourselves, so our lives are lived in harmony with a larger universal order.

This is a small but crucial difference. The premise of Wright's book is that the story of religion, beginning in the Stone Age and leading up to the present day, is to some extent a movement from Mencken to James. The evolution of religion reflects our ever-evolving understanding of a larger universal order, a transcendent order that is both meaningful and moral.

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Robert Wright is a self-described materialist, and as such, perhaps an unlikely proponent for the belief in God. And yet, after surveying the development of religious thought throughout human history, that is just what he becomes.

"It sounds paradoxical," He writes,

“on the one hand, I think gods arose as illusions, and that the subsequent history of the idea of god is, in some sense, the evolution of an illusion. On the other hand: (1) the story of this evolution itself points to the existence of something you can meaningfully call divinity; and (2) the “illusion,” in the course of evolving, has gotten streamlined in a way that moved it closer to plausibility. In both of these senses, the illusion has gotten less and less illusory.” (p. 4)

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I find Wright’s effort to offer an intellectually satisfying explanation for the development of religion, and our ever-changing ideas about God fascinating. He makes a compelling case not only that belief in God serves a valuable function, but also for the actual existence of a divine moral order.

But there is a difference between believing in the idea of God (or the possibility of God) and actually believing in God.

Karen Armstrong says we are talking far too much about God these days. We are too preoccupied with reasonable explanations, and rational justifications.

Looking back in religious history, Armstrong makes that point that religion “was not primarily something that people thought but something they did. Its truth was acquired by practical action.”

She writes, “religion is a practical discipline, and its insights are not derived from abstract speculation but from spiritual exercise and a dedicated lifestyle. Without such practice, it is impossible to understand the truth of its doctrines.” (p. 318)

Religion is like driving a car. You will never learn how to drive if you simply read the manual or study the rules of the road. You need to get behind the steering wheel and give it a try. Likewise, you can’t learn to dance, paint, or cook by merely perusing texts and recipes. Likewise, the rules of a board game often sound obscure, unnecessarily complicated, and dull until you start to play. That’s when everything falls into place.

Religion is something that can be learned only by constant, dedicated practice. But if you persevere, you find that you can achieve something that seemed initially impossible. Like the swimmer who, instead of sinking to the bottom of the pool, suddenly realizes she can float. Like the athlete who learns to jump higher and with more grace than seems humanly possible.

We don’t always understand how we achieve these feats, because our mind directs our body in a way that bypasses conscious, logical deliberation. But somehow we learn to move beyond our original capacities, and receive a taste of transcendence.

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Worship is one form of religious practice. It is not so much about what we believe, but about what we do, together. It is about singing together, praying or meditating, it is about allowing ourselves to be moved by music, and touched by words. It is about taking time to remember the stories of our lives, in which we find sustenance and hope. It is about contemplating mythical and mysterious dimensions of meaning.

The dictionary says worship is about God. But I would say worship is about doing something that reminds us of the larger dimensions of our lives, the transcendent realities amidst which we live, which we too easily overlook, and yet which are always there if we would only open our eyes.

Armstrong says,

“the point of religion [is] to live intensely and richly here and now. Truly religious people are ambitious. They want lives overflowing with significance. They have always desired to integrate with their daily lives the moments of rapture and insight that came to them in dreams, in their contemplation of nature, and in their [interaction] with one another and with the animal world. Instead of being crushed and embittered by the sorrow of life, they sought to retain their peace and serenity in the midst of their pain.” (p. 329)

We may speak of religion, we may speak of worship, we may speak of God. But all of these words point to an experience that words can never capture: the experience of standing in awe under a heaven of stars, the experience of loneliness seeking communion, the experience of kindness expressed in acts of love, the experience of the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond.

May our worship renew our sense of wonder,  
May we deepen our awareness of that transcending mystery,  
Which is best expressed not in words of God, but in acts of love.  
Amen.