

## **The Meaning of God**

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Good morning! Today we are going to talk about the meaning of God.

I have to say right at the beginning that this was the most difficult message that I have written so far. I think it is hard to write a message about the meaning of God without talking about what God means to me. In this message, I am going to talk about the psychological purpose that believing in God serves. I am also going to talk about Ralph Waldo Emerson's view of God. As far as my own personal belief in God, I am on the fence. I am trained in the scientific method, so I have a hard time believing in anything that I can't observe or at least infer through observation.

Yet I also agree with Emerson that our mere existence is a miracle. How did we get here? How are we alive? I understand the theory that, over millions of years, RNA nucleotides turned into protocells which then became the basis for more complex organisms. But the fact that we are alive still seems like a miracle. And how did the universe get started in the first place?

These are the questions that make it impossible for me to rule out the existence of God. The Unitarian Universalist church is the right place for me because I don't feel like I'm supposed to believe one thing or the other. I like the feeling that we are all in this thing together, pursuing our own spiritual journeys but in the company of people we can trust. Having said all of that, let's get started with the actual message.

Last week, Katie Clifford delivered a message written by Tim Temerson. Temerson cited one of the most frequent criticisms of Unitarian Universalism, which is that you can believe whatever you want. For those who are unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism, the idea that you can believe whatever you want suggests that the Unitarian Universalist church doesn't stand for anything. People might wonder what the point of a religious organization is if it won't even say whether God exists.

One of the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism is "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." For those who are attracted to this church, the freedom to believe what you want is the greatest strength of Unitarian Universalism. For many of us here today, the moment we discovered Unitarian Universalism was an aha! moment. We discovered that we had been Unitarian Universalists our entire lives, but we just didn't know it. We are here because we do *not* want to be told what to believe and we are skeptical of religious institutions that claim to know the answers.

The Unitarian Universalist faith is non-creedal, which means that we do not have a statement of faith. I was raised in the United Church of Christ. The United Church of Christ's statement of faith begins with the words "We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God." These words might be true. However, I personally cannot believe in them 100%.

When I attended the UCC church, I felt a constant tension. No matter how patient the UCC church was with me, I felt like my doubts were ultimately supposed to be resolved in favor of the beliefs in the church's statement of faith.

I imagine that other people also find the expectation to believe in a specific statement of faith too limiting. Yet, the Unitarian Universalist covenant with its members to pursue a free and responsible search for truth and meaning is *exactly* what makes many people skeptical of Unitarian Universalism. The number of Unitarian Universalists in the United States is tiny in comparison to the number of people who belong to churches that have statements of faith. According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center, Evangelical Protestants comprise 25.4% of the United States population, Catholics comprise 20.8% of the United States population, and Mainline Protestants comprise 14.7% of the United States population. The Pew research study lumps the Unitarian Universalist church into a miscellaneous category called "Others in the "Other Christian" tradition." This category comprises less than 0.3% of the population of the United States.

The Unitarian Universalist Church has been around for a long time, so it has had plenty of time to increase its membership numbers. In 1793 the Universalist Church of America was founded and in 1825 the American Unitarian Association was founded. In 1961 these churches merged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Today there are around 154,790 UU members in the world. In comparison, according to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon church currently has 16,118,169 members worldwide. The Mormon church was founded in 1830, which is slightly *after* the Universalist and Unitarian churches were founded, yet the Mormon church has almost 16 million *more* members than the Unitarian Universalist church.

Why do churches that have statements of faith have so many more members than the Unitarian Universalist church?

For many people, I think that a clearly defined statement of faith satisfies the basic human need for structure and order. Most people want to know *how* we got here, *why* we're here, and what happens to us when we die. A formal statement of faith explains God's role in the world and tells people what will happen. Many people conceptualize God as a powerful being who keeps a watchful eye on us, who cares about us, and who wants us to be moral. For many people who believe in God, God represents structure and order.

The human need for structure occurs at a biological level and it percolates up through our patterns of thought. Our brains impose structure onto the vast amount of information that flows into our brains so that we can figure out what to do. We like to know that there is a rhyme and reason to what is happening in the world. If things happen for a reason, then we have the security of knowing why something happened and we can also predict the future.

For example, if I believe in the just world hypothesis, then I believe that people will be rewarded for good actions and they will be punished for evil actions. Therefore, I know that good things will happen to me if I am good. Obviously, there are some holes in this logic because bad things

happen to good people all the time. The just world hypothesis is an attempt to impose structure onto the chaos and randomness of life.

Random events can stress us out because we are unable to explain *why* they happened. If I happen to be standing next to a puddle when a car drives by and splashes water on me, then that is bad luck. If I believe in the just world hypothesis, I might think that the car splashed me as punishment for something bad that I had done in the past. On the other hand, I might want to blame the driver. Maybe the driver wasn't paying attention. Or worse, maybe the driver *wanted* to splash me. By imposing structure onto a random event, we are able to satisfy the need to know *why* the event happened.

Belief in a powerful, interventionist God can give us a reason *why* a random event happened. If someone does something bad, then God will make sure that justice is served to that person. The goal is to make sure that good actors are rewarded and bad actors are punished.

Maybe the biggest question of all that humans have been grappling with is: what happens to us when we die? We go about our lives with the knowledge that we will die. We are conscious of our own mortality and this causes anxiety. One way to relieve our anxiety is to believe in the afterlife. According to terror management theory, we stave off our fear of death by believing that our immortal selves will continue on either symbolically or in an afterlife. In either case, these notions provide us with the structure that we need to know the answer. The answer is that we live on even after death. This fulfills the basic human need to know and it reassures us that our lives have meaning.

In contrast, ambiguity can be incredibly frustrating. Think of the last time that you watched a TV show that ended on a cliffhanger. You really want to know what happens next. Perhaps some of us are guilty of binge-watching on Netflix or Amazon or Hulu. We know that binge-watching is bad. We know that we will lose tons of sleep and that we will feel miserable and exhausted the next day. But we need to know what will happen in the next episode. So you find yourself at 3am barely able to keep your eyes open, fighting off sleep, feeling exhausted, knowing that you absolutely *must* go to sleep, but despite all rational thought, you start another episode because you absolutely have to know what happens next.

If we think it is hard to not know what happens in our favorite TV show, then imagine how humanity has suffered over the centuries trying to figure out what happens to us when we die. A church's statement of faith can provide the comfort and certainty that we are looking for.

One of the most famous Unitarians, Ralph Waldo Emerson challenged the Unitarian church's view of God. Emerson was ordained as a UU minister in 1829, but he resigned his position as pastor of Boston's Second Church after only three years.

Emerson was quite a rabble rouser in his day. He did not interpret the Bible literally. He did not believe in immortality or the afterlife. He focused on the moral teachings of the Bible. For Emerson, pure religion was the same thing as pure morality. Emerson felt that the Christian church had become too fixated on the person of Jesus and had lost sight of Jesus's message of love. Emerson thought that the miracles in the Bible received way too much attention and that

focusing on these miracles diminished the Christian faith. In Emerson's view, our very existence is the greatest miracle of all. Our existence is divine and we are divine beings.

In 1838, Emerson gave a speech to the graduating ministers of Harvard Divinity School. This speech later became known as the "Divinity School Address" and it summarized his views of God. Harvard Divinity School was furious at Emerson for this speech and they did not invite him back for 30 years. Emerson was surprised by how controversial his speech was. People accused him of being an atheist and of trying to tear down the Christian church.

Rather than trying to tear down the church, Emerson was trying to renew the church. He wanted the church to shift its focus from the person of Jesus to the content of Jesus's teachings. Emerson wanted the church to shift its focus from supernatural miracles to the miracle of our very existence.

I think that Emerson's sentiments are especially relevant today. A 2017 Pew Research poll asked people whether they think of themselves as religious and it also asked them whether they think of themselves as spiritual. People were *much* more likely to say that they think of themselves as spiritual. 75% of people said that they think of themselves as spiritual. Only 54% of people said that they think of themselves as religious.

When Emerson gave the Divinity School Address, he was challenging the religious conventions of the Unitarian church at the time. Emerson was not questioning his belief in God. Rather, he was questioning how the Unitarian church *portrayed* God.

I see a similarity in the religious versus spiritual distinction today. I get the sense that many people associate religion with strict religious dogma and that they associate spiritual with some kind of underlying divine presence. They might not be able to describe precisely what they mean by "spiritual", but they think there is something there.

When the Pew researchers combined the questions about people being spiritual and religious, they found that 27% of people said that they were spiritual but not religious. This 27% of people who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious is the fastest-growing spiritual demographic in the United States. Yet, what I find most fascinating about this Pew Research poll is that the majority of this 27% of people are actually formally affiliated with a religious group. This means that most of the people who identify as spiritual but not religious *also* identify as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim or some other religion.

To me, this suggests that a large segment of people who belong to religious organizations feel somehow limited by or in some state of tension with their religious organizations. Like Emerson, their belief in God might be strong, but they might feel somehow alienated by formal religious doctrine. Or maybe they believe in something that they can't describe. I remember growing up in the United Church of Christ, reciting the Lord's prayer, and participating in the responsive readings. If I had taken this Pew survey, I think that I would have been one of the people who said that they were spiritual but not religious even though I attended a UCC church regularly.

When we think about the meaning of God, we can appreciate the comfort and assurance that a powerful, benevolent God gives us. A powerful, benevolent God satisfies the basic human need for structure and order. Belief in God can provide an explanation for why things happen. It can give meaning to our lives and reassure us of an afterlife.

On the other hand, the freedom to question whether God exists – or to question whether God exists in the way that we have been led to believe – enables us to explore our spirituality independently and on our own terms. It also opens us up to uncertainty and ambiguity. Suddenly, no one is there to tell us the answers.

When I was about 10 years old, I remember asking my dad, “What is the meaning of life.” My dad didn’t miss a beat. He said, “The meaning of life is to serve God’s will.” I remember being impressed that my dad had that answer right on the tip of his tongue. I also couldn’t decide if he had given me an answer or a non-answer.

Serving God’s will is open to interpretation. I don’t think that anyone can demonstrate with 100% certainty whether God exists. However, we can do our best to come to our own understanding of what God is or isn’t. We can imagine how God would want us to live our lives. We can also imagine how a moral person lives his or her life independent of any notion of God. In practice, maybe they are the same thing.

In the Thought for Contemplation, Emerson conveys his experience of God. He describes a scene in which he is overcome by the beauty and perfection of nature. Emerson believed that God was present in everything and that nature was an expression of God’s divinity. In his poem, Emerson conveys an impression of God that he lacks the words to describe. I think that sounds like a good description of spirituality.

Please turn to hymn number 343 in your hymnals.