

IS GOD REAL?
by Forrest Gilmore, © 2007

“When I say ‘God,’ it is poetry and not theology. Nothing any theologian ever wrote about God has helped me much, but everything that 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.”

- John Haynes Holmes

“There is no God, I’m sure of that. But the more they’ve sought me out, the more convinced I am that there are holy men and women. So I send blessings, such as they are, to all my priests who constitute the Resistance. And if they like, they’re welcome to include me in their prayers. Can’t hurt. None of us will free the world of intolerance alone. We need the people of God, especially if God isn’t there.”

- Paul Monette

“I was six when I saw that everything was God, and my hair stood up... It was on a Sunday, I remember. My sister was only a tiny child then, and she was drinking her milk, and all of a sudden I saw that *she* was God and the *milk* was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God, if you know what I mean.”

- J.D. Salinger

“If I’m going to believe in God then there’s a reason for earthquakes. But the only possible designer I could believe in has to be benevolent. Not the one who says, ‘You screw around with me and I’ll send the lightning bolt.’ We’re taught to forgive, but he sends you to hell for missing mass. Some days, I’m a total nonbeliever... other days, I think... how can there not be a God?”

- Paul Fargis as quoted in *Children & Religion* by Martha Fay

“The SS hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. “Where is God? Where is he?” a man behind me asked. As the boy, after a long time was still in agony on the rope, I heard the man cry again, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer, “Here he is; hanging here on this gallows...”

-Elie Wiesel

“Let your soul go free for a moment into that scene outside your window... and there encounter gape-jawed and silent, the God of birds and birth defects, trees and cancer, quarks and galaxies, earthquakes and supernovas -- awesome, edifying, dreadful and good, more beautiful and more terrible than is strictly necessary. Let it strike you dumb with worship and fear, beyond words, beyond logic. What is it? It is everything that is.”

- Chet Raymo

As a young boy, I was terrified of dying. I had trouble sleeping and nightmares

when I did. I just couldn't bear the thought that at some point it would all be just over. I hoped so much that God and an afterlife were real so that I wouldn't have to die. I remember one such experience praying to my childhood god who I was never quite sure existed or not.

My father and I were visiting Florida. He was working on a shoot for his company filming a commercial. The shoot was going very late so I went into the car to rest. The feelings of fear and death came up strong for me as I sat in the back of that car. I looked out the rear window to see a streetlight casting its hue. I prayed (begged almost) that that childhood god of mine would show me some sign of its existence, some evidence that I did not need to fear. I prayed that the streetlight might blink just to let me know, just to help me see that it would be all right...

The streetlight never blinked.

Many years later, as a seminary student, I participated in an excellent class with Rebecca Parker, the president of my school. In the course we were assigned a paper to try and articulate our sense of God. Rebecca wrote an intriguing response to my writing. She said, ironically, my description of God most closely resembled a Buddhist form of atheism.

The topic of *Is God Real?* has taken on renewed vigor these last few years – bolstered significantly by the rise of Islamic terrorism and the increasing presence of Christian fundamentalism in American politics. Several scientists and philosophers have found themselves on the bestseller lists challenging the notion of God, faith and religion – Neuroscientist Sam Harris with *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, philosopher Daniel Dennett with *Breaking the Spell*, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins with *The God Delusion* and most recently and perhaps most cuttingly

from political commentator Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great: How Religions Poisons Everything*.

Also, perhaps less known to many of us is an internet sensation now taking place on YouTube. A group that calls themselves the Rational Response Squad, having read of the Biblical claim that the one unpardonable sin, the one sin that guarantees a trip to Hell, is denying the Holy Spirit, decided to invite people to tempt damnation and do just that. The Rational Response Squad then issued the blasphemy challenge, daring people to post videos of themselves denying the existence of the Holy Spirit. At this point, well over a thousand people have already done so.

While I don't agree with all the arguments of these books and websites, I find myself strangely cheering these people on... I feel that at least some of the values they are pushing are at a minimum worthy for our culture to hear. I also appreciate that they have challenged the prevailing view that free speech applies to everything except criticizing another religious tradition. We debate about politics, morality, sexuality, economics, family, war and peace, the environment, just about everything, yet somehow challenging another person's religious beliefs has been off limits, even despite the fact that religious fundamentalists are constantly criticizing religious values different from their own. These authors have opened the door – allowing us to once again have a public debate about the nature of God and belief.

A recent study from Newsweek found that 91% of Americans say they believe in God. But the survey failed to ask the respondents which God they believe in. Another more in-depth study, performed by the World Values Survey Association, conducted research in eighty countries and asked a large sample of the earth's population which of four alternatives came closest to their own beliefs: a personal God, a spirit or life force,

neither of these, or don't know. 42% chose the personal God. 34% said a spirit or life force. 10% said neither of these and 14% said they didn't know. That's a much different story from the Newsweek poll – with 58% of the world's population claiming not to believe in God as a personified being.

And even more intriguingly, Sociologist Philip Zuckerman of Pitzer College, reviewing a larger number of studies from over fifty countries and leaving out nations where atheism may have been enforced politically, estimates conservatively that there are between 500 and 750 million atheists worldwide. Even at the most conservative number of 500 million, that would make atheism the fourth-largest belief system in the world, only behind Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

With respect to belief in God as a personal being, interventionist in character, supernatural, worthy of worship, I am an atheist. When understood literally, I don't believe in Yahweh. I don't believe in Allah. I don't believe in God the Father. I also don't believe in God the Mother. For me, God is not a person.

Rev. Forrest Church, minister at All Souls in Manhattan, when someone tells him he or she is an atheist, he responds by saying, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." After a time, he acknowledges that he doesn't believe in that God either.

I find that a valuable exercise – to explore the God we don't believe in. God as a person is my answer.

God as a person has throughout the ages been used as a way to fill the gaps in our knowledge. If we don't know something, like the origin of thunder and lightning, or the nature of the seasons, or how life was created, or how the Universe began, a controlling God fills the gaps. Perhaps one of the greatest spiritual disciplines, when we don't know something, is to not impulsively fill the gaps, but to simply witness the mystery.

This has shown up for me recently in confronting our very existence. We have all heard the argument – if God created the universe, who created God? This very argument brings us to the deepest riddle of our existence... why we exist at all. I have recently come to confront this profound mystery not just in an abstract way, but as a deeply felt experience. How in the world could we possibly have come to be? How can something come from nothing? And if something did come from nothing, how could that actually be nothing? It's totally unfathomable. And I have found myself in sheer awe that anything exists at all, totally stunned by the awareness that, in some sense, we shouldn't be. We shouldn't exist at all, and yet we are here. As Chet Raymo wrote, the sheer impossibility of our existence has struck me “dumb with worship and fear, beyond words, beyond logic.”

Years ago, a young man, just out of college, was camping in the wilderness. Shielded by his tent, he slept through the night. Just before dawn as the light began to grow, a gentle rain began to patter on his shelter. Awakened by the soothing yet precise sound, he found himself strangely transported. He began to feel like the rain. Expanding in awareness, his sense of himself grew, growing into and beyond the tent into the rain and the soil beneath him and the plants and animals around him, the sky above him... feeling the cool, gentle rain as if it were him. For a flicker of time, he felt whole, connected, one with all life.

As you may have guessed, that young camper was me, almost 15 years ago now. And that moment was one of the foundational experiences of my life. I continue to share that such an experience of oneness with all things is the ultimate spiritual state, the one that calls forth the greatest sense of strength and nourishment, and also the most compassion and moral activism. For me, it is this experience of oneness and the

cultivation of it in others that drives me as a minister and spiritual teacher.

And it is this spiritual experience of oneness, this sense of connection and love, this profound feeling of being filled and renewed, that I at times call God. For me, God is the whole, the encompassing of all existence, the third part as poet Merrit Malloy says “to every two people that doesn’t exist when they are separate.” God is the word I use to remind myself that life has done quite well without my help. The trees and the leaves, the raccoons, and sunrises have all come to be on their own and we, as humans, did not make them. When I refer to God, it is that grand mystery beyond my making whose very nature is life, a process in which I can most definitely participate as a co-creator, or resist causing undue and serious harm to our planet. Does this God think? I don’t know. Does it have principles that promote life? I believe it does. Is it real? Yes, definitely.

I sympathize, of course, with the argument of some that we should not use the word, God, except in reference to personified beings, that to do so muddies the waters. Yet, I also do not wish to concede a profound word to people because they are more dedicated to a view I disagree with. This is, in fact, the very nature of theology. There never has been one view of God, but many views competing with each other for influence.

But whatever our choice about the use of the word or not, this is our ongoing spiritual challenge – to call forth our powers of discernment to find meaning and value for our lives... and in doing so, to give back to the world that has given us so much. This is our shared path, our common journey. We walk together, both blind and sighted, striving to find our way towards truth. May we continue to do so with love and vigor.