

Thomas Paine Reading from *The Age of Reason*
prior to delivery of
One Unitarian's Views on Religion

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy.

But, lest it should be supposed that I believe many other things in addition to these, I shall, in the process of this work, declare the things I do not believe, and my reasons for not believing them.

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.

ONE UNITARIAN'S VIEWS ON RELIGION
July 5, 2009
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For about 30 years Kathie and I were members of a Unitarian congregation in Pa. Originally called GNUF Greater Norristown Unitarian Fellowship, but subsequently renamed Thomas Paine Unitarian Fellowship it existed throughout that time period as a fellowship – meaning without the benefit of either full time or part time minister. So each Sunday there was an invited guest speaker and one of our members performed lay leader duty. Being a small congregation, this duty came around to me fairly often over the course of 30 years. So the following opening words are still fresh in my memory.

“Good morning and welcome to the Sunday morning service of The Greater Norristown Unitarian Fellowship. The purpose of this fellowship is to further individual freedom of belief, the search for truth, and the democratic process in human relations.”

While, the democratic process in human relations and searching for truth is good stuff, it was that other phrase that really floated my boat. I was not only being given the freedom, but being *encouraged* to formulate and develop my own beliefs. Kathie, in her original song read earlier, asked “Do you call that religion?” My current answer about Unitarianism is “YOU BETCHA”. In fact, I would love to see the UUA, at a future General Assembly, consider giving up our statement that we are a Dogma-free religion and, instead, indicate that our Dogma is the “Individual Freedom of Belief.”

So, with this freedom, what have I come up with? First, I had better issue a disclaimer. The following ideas, views, beliefs are not necessarily those of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the UUCSJS nor any of their members. In fact, even the speaker reserves the right to change his thinking in the future.

The major religions of the western world (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) preach that in the beginning GOD created the universe and all that is within it. Creationism versus Evolutionism is occasionally a topic for debate or discussion here and elsewhere. Most, if not all here, consider that debate a no-brainer. I do. But the concept of the evolution of GOD in western religions does interest me. So here are my thoughts on the evolution of GOD.

Once upon a time... Somewhere, way back in time, a group of guys were sitting around the campfire bemoaning the fact that the sun had not shined for several days. All understood that they had no control over whether the sun shone or did not. But one of their number, succumbing to a spontaneous impulse, raised his eyes and his arms skyward and offered this very first prayer to the sun GOD. It went something like this. “Hey you up there, let the sun shine tomorrow!” And since the sun did indeed shine the next day, the course of history was dramatically changed. The news of the man’s accomplishment spread around the community and he soon realized that *his* status had changed. People were not sure exactly what or how he had made the sun shine the next day but only in the FACT that he had done this. Some were after him to explain his exploit. So he spent a couple days thinking about it before coming up with the following explanation. Up there (pointing to the sky) lives a race of people who refer to themselves as GODs. The man said

further that he was not always able to communicate with the sun GOD but that he was able to do so occasionally. He indicated that he had achieved contact and produced a sunny day many times over the preceding year. Several weeks later, after a string of overcast sunless days, he was approached to bring back the sun and he was given a small token to thank him for his effort. When the sun finally came out bright two days later, the priest, as he was now calling himself, explained that the sun GOD was not always available to respond immediately but he always did respond.

All right, maybe that was not exactly how polytheism actually got started, but then again it probably was pretty close to the way it went. And once the idea of a race of superhuman beings living in the skies was planted in the minds of humans, the mythology of humans able to communicate with them and call forth the power of the GODS became an accepted reality. There were Gods of war, Gods of fertility, Gods of the oceans, etc, etc, etc.

I watched a documentary on PBS several years ago. It credited the origination of the one GOD concept to a nomadic member of the Israelite clan. Whether that was the start of Mono theism or if it began elsewhere, I will provide my guess as to how the idea developed in the mind of the originator. Like most new ideas it began with a guy with time on his hands sitting around thinking.

He could trace his ancestors back for 2 generations; his friends could also trace their ancestors back for 2 generations and, except for one common grandmother, there were no common relations. If all those grandparents had no common ancestors and for 2 more generations there were no common ancestors, well, we would be getting into really large numbers here. And our whole clan is not that large. And what about the camels and the goats and how did the sand get here and the hills and water and air and and and. Well, this was some really heavy stuff, but he had time to think about it and think and think he did. He finally came up with what he considered a very plausible answer. Everything he could see, or had heard about, had been started by one source. A supernatural entity that had, shall we say, CREATED everything. The more he thought about this the more certain he became that he had come up with the answer. The whole world, the whole universe had been CREATED by this one GOD. He couldn't wait to share his knowledge with the other members of his clan. And, proving once again how strange history is, they slowly began to accept this idea. And, when decades or centuries later, certain individuals were to

receive communications from this CREATOR, the concept of mono theism was well on its way to achieving universal acceptance.

Now whether my stories about how poly theism and mono theism got started are even close to accurate, is not important. My central points are though. Poly theism started with the human desire to obtain supernatural help or favors. Mono theism started with the human desire to put a single starting point to human existence and to the existence of the universe.

The mono theistic movement took root and flourished over the years through the proclamations of various prophets that they had experienced communications from GOD who had charged them with informing all mankind of HIS laws and the requirement for all to obey these commandments. It is my belief, however, that there has never been a direct communication from GOD to any human being. Thomas Paine in “The Age of Reason” comments on this as follows:

Revelation, when applied to religion, means something communicated immediately from God to man,

No one will deny or dispute the power of the Almighty to make such a communication, if He pleases. But admitting, for the sake of a case, that something has been revealed to a certain person, and not revealed to any other person, it is revelation to that person only. When he tells it to a second person, a second to a third, a third to a fourth, and so on, it ceases to be a revelation to all those persons. It is revelation to the first person only, and hearsay to every other, and consequently they are not obliged to believe it.

It is a contradiction in terms and ideas, to call anything a revelation that comes to us at second-hand, either verbally or in writing. Revelation is necessarily limited to the first communication -- after this it is only an account of something which that persons says was a revelation made to him; and though he may find himself obliged to believe it, it cannot be incumbent on me to believe it in the same manner; for it was not a revelation made to me, and I have only his word for it that it was made to him.

So what do I believe? Well, this is the short part of the talk. I will go back to a talk I gave to this group about a half dozen years ago when we were meeting at the Jewish Community center in Margate. That appearance was titled “GOD or $Y = 1/X$ ”. Like today, I attributed the current universal view of GOD, to a desire to find a single point of origin for the existence of all mankind and the whole universe. My “or” in the title “ $Y = 1/X$ ” is the mathematical equation for a parabola (actually a pair of parabolas). But it is only important to consider one property of an equation representing a parabola to illustrate my thesis. No matter how large a value you assign to the X variable in the equation, the Y value never reaches zero. Now if you add a minus sign to the equation making it read $Y = -1/X$ and start giving X large negative numbers (with X representing time in years) and observe the value of Y (representing the entire universe) you become aware that the universe gets smaller and smaller, BUT it never reaches a single starting point.

In English—there is a fairly simple mathematical equation that can represent everything in the Universe as we go back in time from the present. And no matter how far back we consider time, the Universe never reaches its smallest point.

Now what does that prove? ABSOLUTELY NOTHING! But it does encourage someone like me to warm to the idea that there was not a single point of origin for the universe.

If no single point of origin for the universe, then no CREATOR; if no CREATOR then no revelations made to prophets, if no revelations then no words of GOD were ever delivered; if no words of GOD, then what is it that is being interpreted for us by religious leaders now, and for the past several thousand years?