

Fides Post Mortem: Modern Spirituality After the Death of God

Good morning. It's really a treat and an honor for me to be here, so thank you Fiona for your lovely introduction, thank you Martha for your music, and thank you all for welcoming me so warmly.

It is a little surreal for me to be standing here—in front what I hesitate to call pews, speaking from what I hesitate to call a pulpit—in a church, on a Sunday morning.

I imagine I'm not the only one here in a Unitarian Universalist congregation who's experienced some discomfort with traditional religion. One can't speak for all UUs, but I suspect many of us share a common desire to seek spirituality outside of traditional religions.

I was not raised in a religious family. I am ethnically Jewish on my father's side, but as some of you may know, that says very little about the spiritual character of the family.

There's an old joke about this, where a man goes to his rabbi and says, "Rabbi, I feel a little guilty in temple, because I'm not sure about God."

And the rabbi waves his hand and says, "Eh, why should you be special? Half the people here don't believe in God either!"

Judaism, and Jewish culture, puts a much stronger emphasis on behavior and ethics rather than the particulars of belief—very much like Unitarian Universalism.

I first encountered UU when I was 17. Naturally—like many teenagers—I was sure I had it all figured out, and in my arrogance, I dismissed UU.

Because although you're obviously a very nice bunch, it seemed to me that you don't *believe* in anything.

Of course the irony there is that, both then and even now, 11 years later, I myself don't really "believe" in much of anything either. I could never bring myself to believe in God, the soul, the afterlife, *et cetera*.

In fact, for much of my life, I've questioned the point of spirituality entirely. I could understand it rationally for others, but I could never really relate with spiritual people myself.

Spirituality, to me, was always synonymous with belief in the unfounded. That is, belief in the realness of things that cannot not be truly *known* through reason or observation.

Now, very, very recently, I have discovered *that* belief to be itself unfounded, and I was freed from this mistake in a coffee shop, by nothing less than intervention by a figure from mythology.

I'll get into all of that. But the self-portrait that I want to paint for you right now, is of a young man who felt, for many years, perpetually perplexed by spirituality, as I understood it.

My mother is the most spiritual person I know. So much so that I, in my secularity, lack the perspective or the words to do her experience justice.

I can say for sure that she has a *deep* sense of connectivity with something higher than herself, and that she opens her heart and mind to receive it and let it guide her.

A child of the cultural and spiritual movements of the 1960s, she *believes* with great certainty, from the deepest parts of her self and her experiences, in many potent, spiritual forces. They give her wisdom. They give her strength. They give her joy.

But she holds no dogmas. She doesn't attend a church. She doesn't thump scripture—though she can come a little close with Thorough or Emerson—and she isn't an absolutist.

But despite her lack of adherence to a particular religion, she is able to enjoy that most powerful intimacy: that which can exist between oneself and the universe.

She fits, in other words, a common designation these days—"spiritual but not religious."

I have always admired this about my mother, just as I have always admired it in UU congregations.

But when I see the strength of my mother's spirituality, or hear it in the hymns of this congregation, I have always felt a certain...*envy*.

Because as much as I have always yearned for it, as I said, I have always seemed to lack that sense for the sacred. I have always been drawn to spirituality and indeed religion on some level.

I have always wondered about the *true nature* of life and reality, and spirituality seems to be the natural place to seek this out. But as soon as I approached, something within me has always recoiled away.

I have always run up against my total inability to *suspend disbelief* when engaging with spirituality, regardless of the tradition.

As would say my mother, dear friends like Fiona, and the proverbial atheist rabbi, it's perfectly *okay* to not *believe*, there's nothing wrong with it.

A person can be *neither spiritual, nor religious*.

But why, then, do I keep being pulled back? Why am I, indeed, standing here, in front of pews of congregants, speaking at a pulpit, in a church, on a Sunday morning?

This tension—between a latent desire for spiritual *engagement* and an instinctive discomfort with spiritual *belief*—is not unique to me. I'm sure many of you have heard about the decline of religious affiliation, church attendance, *et cetera* in the West in recent years.

But beyond the statistics, I think this gets to a more foundational change in who we are today, compared to our ancestors.

And it points to something which is, in many respects, one of the central social and cultural questions of our times:

What in the world should we believe in, now that God...is dead?

Another risky statement! Before any of you reach for the torches and pitchforks, let me explain what I mean by that...

You see, we have all been attending an awkward funeral, for 480 years.

I always caution myself against overstating differences between modern people and our ancestors. A closer look at history and anthropology reveals that people in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and even prehistory shared many of our own behaviors, concerns, and priorities.

Yet I do see one important difference between us.

Imagine, for a moment, that I was a crazy person. And I stood up here and declared, "I dare the Universe to do something *terrible* to me, right now!"

Does anyone else feel uncomfortable even thinking about that? I'm a little tempted to find some wood to knock on. Superstition—the intuition that larger, mysterious forces might shape our fate—seems to be baked into human nature.

But for our ancient and medieval ancestors, such a declaration would be profoundly unsettling in a way that might be hard for us to fully appreciate.

To them, everything—the weather, harvests, success in business or politics, the survival of children, every possible good fortune or calamity—was a direct reflection of the favor, or disfavor, of God.

They weren't ignorant. They understood, for example, that losing a home to a fire could be explained by a forgotten candle or poor construction. But if we, as moderns, ask why *that particular house* burned on *that particular day*, we might attribute it to human negligence, or just bad luck.

For our ancestors, though, such an event would have been a sign of divine displeasure. Perhaps someone had sinned and needed to repent. Perhaps they needed to offer a sacrifice.

Or perhaps it meant their gods had abandoned them altogether, and it was time to embrace a new faith. History is full of stories of individuals and entire societies converting during moments of crisis.

Yet, despite shifts in religious affiliation, the underlying assumption—the belief in a world where God or gods intervene directly in daily life—remained unquestioned, even among most intellectuals.

But then, in 1543, something remarkable happened.

The astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus published a book called *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*.

In it, Copernicus proposed that, rather than a fixed plane at the center of the universe, the Earth was actually *in motion*, and revolved around the Sun.

This wasn't merely a challenge to the astronomical model of his day—it fundamentally shook the worldview I just described. If the Earth is not at the center of the cosmos, then perhaps humanity is not at the center of God's attention.

While it was not widely circulated at the time, Copernicus' work would be ruthlessly attacked by both Catholic and Protestant authorities. And it would take more than a century before the work of figures like Galileo, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton would ultimately prove the theory true.

But while no one knew it then, Copernicus had changed the course of history. He had struck the first blow in the death of God.

That phrase—"God is dead"—has become a meme today, like the sort of thing you'd hear from edgy college kids. But it originates from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, notably in his 1882 book, *The Joyful Science*.

When Nietzsche wrote 'God is dead,' he didn't literally mean someone murdered God. Rather, he meant with the rise of modern science and education, society's old religious foundations were eroding.

By the late 1800s, more and more people were coming to accept that the Earth wasn't made in seven days, that life evolved over millions of years, and that reality was governed by natural laws, rather than divine micromanagement.

In Nietzsche's words, "the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable", everything that was "built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it", including "the whole of our European morality", is destined for "collapse".

These are strong words. Of course, many people today sincerely maintain their belief in God. Christianity's influence in the West has undoubtedly declined, but it certainly isn't dead, and the faith held by modern believers remains deeply precious to them, and not something I intend to dismiss or belittle.

But I do find that, when I get a chance to discuss theology with believers—whether they adhere to Abrahamic, Dharmic, Eastern faiths or others—they often treat their mythologies and scriptures as metaphors.

Modern Christians might feel very much that the love Jesus professed is present in their lives, and that his moral example is a good one to follow. But many do not believe that he literally walked on water or rose from the dead.

Modern Buddhists might strongly believe that morally good or bad actions do resonate in their current lives. But many are skeptical of the notion of literal reincarnation after death, based on karma.

So I think the essential point Nietzsche makes is broadly correct: many modern humans are simply no longer capable of the kind of unquestioning faith our ancestors held. For us today, the way we perceive, contemplate, and understand our place in the universe has fundamentally changed.

So, where does this leave us?

Whole branches of philosophy and theology grapple with the implications of the death of God, and I won't fully do justice to the subject this morning. But this is what I like to call the problem of modern spirituality.

Nietzsche predicted that after the loss of traditional religious belief, people would experience spiritual and moral confusion. Having toppled the old religious structures, many would feel lost,

unsure how to move forward, unsure what is true, unsure how to fill the void in our lives once occupied by almighty God.

We find ourselves then, 482 years after Copernicus's discovery, stuck at God's funeral—unsure how to leave the cemetery, making awkward chit-chat because we didn't know the guy very well, and bickering over his collection of dusty old books and relics, because he never left us a will.

Yep, Nietzsche would take one look at me and say, boom, there's a guy stuck in the post-mortem malaise. Desperate for meaning but without anything he can fix himself to. *Hungry* for a spiritual life and engagement, but profoundly jaded, because the options on the table seem to conflict with my totally secularized, modern worldview.

These are the kinds of things I discuss with our dear friend, Fiona, in a coffee shop in New London – and a quick thank you to Grounds, for providing a place for such great conversations.

I was talking to her about a month ago—laying out all the things I've just described. How I just don't get spirituality at all, I have all these thoughts about philosophy and life and the universe, but I just can't engage that *spiritual* component. I was really venting about this, it was a real frustration.

But I noticed, out of the corner of my eye—there's a guy that keeps glancing at us, I think he's listening in a bit.

Now have any of you ever heard of the stories of the itinerant holy man, the wandering sage or the disguised deity, who shows up out of nowhere, teaches some critical lesson, and then disappears mysteriously?

There's a famous tale in Greek mythology where Hermes and Zeus disguise themselves as travelers. Buddhist canon has multiple stories where the Buddha appears to people as a beggar. I remember as a child my dad reading me an old Jewish folktale, where God himself turns up on people's doors, appearing as a simple old man.

Really, though, I kind of thought this guy in the coffee shop just looked a little like me, but about 10 years older.

So he gets up and approaches us and he says, "I've been listening to your conversation, and would you mind if I shared some thoughts?"

I said, "Sure, I'd be thrilled," you know, I was grateful he had the vulnerability to come talk to some strangers.

He said that, like me, he was always into philosophy and science, but was always a little put off by spirituality.

But he said, that he had had a professor—or perhaps a mentor or friend, I can't quite recall—who shared with him a perspective that might help me.

He said that spirituality isn't actually about *belief* in any particular thing at all. Whether one believes there are gods, or an afterlife, or anything of the sort isn't what makes a person spiritual or not.

What makes a person spiritual is their openness to having these very kinds of conversations. The depth of their engagement with life, of their feeling, of their curiosity about things that *matter*.

Now I had heard this argument before, so I asked him, “What is the difference then between that and just pure intellect? What actually makes that *spiritual*?”

He said, “You know, *pure* intellect is what you use to fix your bike chain, or get from point A to point B.” It doesn’t grasp anything deeper or more meaningful. There’s an additional motivation underlying that. That’s the human spirit.

I had no answer. I *have* no answer. I told him as much. I told him he may have just done something quite important for me, and I thanked him for it.

He said he had to go, and I asked him if he was local. He said he wasn’t—he was here merely to visit his sister. He left, and just like the wandering sage from the old folktales, he was gone.

Though, he did give us his email so, David, if you’re watching this on Zoom, I hope you’ll forgive me for comparing you to Hermes, the Buddha, and God.

So I looked at Fiona when he left and said, good lord, that absolutely blew me away. I think he just solved my lifelong quandary! “Spirituality” really is something beyond this notion that I had, that it was simply, “Belief in the unfounded.”

I think I get it now. I still don’t really *believe* in anything that I might have traditionally labelled as “spiritual.” For me, God is definitely well and truly dead.

But the human spirit is not. *My* spirit is not. I don’t use my intellect to fix my bike chain. Indeed, I know many wonderful, remarkable people who are highly intellectually or politically engaged, but who will be the first to say that they have neither the time, nor inclination, to deal with life’s higher questions.

But I put my mind and my heart into studying the world, reflecting on life, and connecting deeply with other people through conversations like these.

That is indeed why I’m here with the pews and the pulpit. UU resonates with me—because it honors that spiritual openness without requiring me to sign on to any specific creed.

Fiona told me after that, you know, there are a lot of Bible-thumpers who don’t do that. There are people who *believe* strongly in God, and attend church every week, but don’t put even a second of consideration or reflection into what they believe in—or how they behave.

There are, in other words, people who are religious, but not spiritual.

Yes. But I think I’ve come to accept that I am, in fact, spiritual, but not religious.

Thank you all very, very much.

Opening Words

“Do not believe anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Believe nothing merely on the authority of your teachers or elders... When you know for yourselves what is wholesome, and leads to good, adopt and practice it.”

~The Buddha, *Kalama Sutta*

Words of Reflection

“I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect intended us to forgo their use.”

~Galileo Galilei

Closing Words

“Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them.”

~Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*