

An Open Letter to the Rev. Bill Sinkford, UUA President

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker

The Rev. Dr. Parker serves as Starr King School's President and Professor of Theology.

Dear Bill,

I deeply appreciate your call for a renewed vocabulary of reverence among Unitarian Universalists. Beginning with your sermon in Dallas on Jan. 12, 2003, and followed by coverage in the Dallas Morning News, the New York Times and the Boston Globe, your advocacy that Unitarian Universalists reconsider the place of God in our collective life has stirred debate. One need only visit the Unitarian Universalist Association's electronic forum in response to your call to get a sense of the vitality of the conversation. (<http://www.uua.org/programs/discussion/language/index.html>.) You have touched a nerve that excites imagination and hope, and presses us to re-examine our established values.

Can Unitarian Universalists speak of God? Some outside of Unitarian Universalist circles would find the question itself astounding. "If you can't mention God in church, where can you talk about God?" But we have been wary of God-language and for good reason. God-talk has often aided and abetted injustice and oppression. Unitarian Universalist theologian William R. Jones, in his ground-breaking book "Is God a White Racist?," argues that traditional theology which speaks of God as requiring redemptive suffering has blessed white privilege and sanctioned social structures that multiply black suffering. Feminist theologians have noted that patriarchal patterns in society have been authorized by imagining God as Father, King and Ruler. The struggle for racial justice and the rights of women and children continue. Why resurrect language and images that have caused so much harm?



Over the course of the past 200 years, in the name of justice and liberation, religious liberals have hastened the death of God. We have presided at the funeral of God the King, God the Father, God the Unmoved Mover, God the Old White Man in the Sky, the Able-Bodied God, the Straight God, the All-Knowing God, the Leave-It-All-to-Me-I'll-Take-Care-of-It God, and more. In place of God, we have emphasized human responsibility. We know it is in our hands to create justice, equity, compassion and peace. As Marx said, faith in God too often becomes a way for people to abnegate our responsibility, deny our power and become passive in the face of a sacrosanct status quo. The way the name of God has been so easily on the lips of those who bless acts of war is only the most recent example of people leaning on God to rationalize human actions that are far from holy.

Your call for a renewed religious language is heard by some among us as a threat to this hard-won sobriety in the face of religious language that sanctions injustice and obscures human responsibility. But I hear something else in your call. It is not a call to return to old ways that we have learned are inadequate. Your call is something new -- something that could only happen in the wake of the death of God.

Those who have moved through the death of God find themselves entering a new space -- a space in which the divine can be experienced in a fresh way. The baggage of oppressive images has been left behind. In the ensuing openness, a sense of sacred presence emerges and invites articulation. People come again to the realization that in the face of overwhelming threats to our lives and the life of all we love there is a source of sustenance, resistance and hope that moves within us and beyond us. In a recent essay on the postmodern debate in theology, Michael J. Scanlon comments, "The central meaning of postmodern contemporary thought on God is the breakthrough of God's reality, no longer constrained by the modern logos. Postmodernity has brought a strange return of God to the center of theology. This re-entry of 'the hidden-revealed God now comes through . . . those ignored, marginalized, and colonized by the grand narrative of modernity.'" (Michael J. Scanlon, "The Postmodern Debate" in *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, edited by Gregory Baum, Orbis Books, 1999, p. 236)

Scanlon is quoting David Tracy who makes the case that new language about God emerges in particular from those who have been historically oppressed by the old images. The "strange return of God" to the center of Unitarian Universalism, if it happens, will be a sign to me that we have moved not only from adolescence to maturity -- the metaphor you have invoked -- but from a church of the privileged seeking to help the oppressed, to a community of those who have found a new experience of the divine in the space created by the death of God. This development would take us beyond benevolent paternalism towards an embodied covenant of compassion and justice that surpasses old dichotomies of oppressor and oppressed. It would mean that the fruit of our Unitarian Universalist passion for justice is a renewed and deepened experience of the holy at work among us.

Perhaps this is too much to hope for or too threatening an aspiration for the future of Unitarian Universalism. But your call, I believe, turns us in this direction.

Our debates and discussions at Starr King School in response to your call have touched on other important issues as well. In a paper written for a recent Starr King course in Unitarian Universalist theologies, student Preston Moore argues that your call pushes us to re-examine how we understand the purpose of religious community. Is protecting individual freedom of belief the be all and end all of our purpose as a church, or does this align us too easily with a reduction of religion to the merely private and personal? The language of reverence controversy, he writes, “brings to the surface issues of basic ecclesiological identity.” Will Unitarian Universalist churches remain “based on conservative ‘civic religion’ conceptions of spirituality that accommodate the dominant secular culture; or will [Unitarian Universalism] develop into an integrated religious community capable of expressing deeply held religious convictions in ethical behavior -- particularly when those convictions place its members at odds with that dominant secular culture?”

Thank you, Bill, for provoking us to think more deeply and more boldly about the future we may be able to create for Unitarian Universalism. Here are some questions I hope we can dialogue on further:

In what ways does your call for a renewed language of reverence mark a turning point from a modern to a post-modern expression of Unitarian Universalism?

Are there aspects of your experience as an African American man that inform your call for a renewed language of reverence?

Do you agree with Preston Moore that your call for a renewed language of reverence has implications for Unitarian Universalism’s ecclesiology? Are you asking us to think differently about the centrality of individual freedom of conscience in our religious value system?

Let the conversation continue!

In peace,
Rebecca Ann Parker

Watch for the Rev. Bill Sinkford’s response to Dr. Parker on this Web site.