

# Spirit of Life: An Ancient Concept for Post-modern Times

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Spirit of Life, come unto me.  
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;  
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.  
Roots hold me close; wings set me free  
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

*Singing in the Living Tradition, 1993, Hymn 123*

In Christian theology, the Holy Spirit is the third person in the Trinitarian model of the Godhead. The concept of the spirit originates in the Hebrew scriptures, which use the word “ruach,” meaning breath or wind, as a way of speaking of God’s activity in the world. Through pneumatology, the theological study of the Holy Spirit, views regarding the spirit have evolved for centuries, incorporating New Testament Christology and modern theological views. In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, which never conceptualized the spirit as a person, pneumatology has received remarkably little theological attention. However, recently prominent theologian and Starr King School of Ministry President Reverend Rebecca Parker (Parker, 2002) articulated a distinctive contemporary UU pneumatology much more consistent with the Old Testament concept of “ruach” than with New Testament notions of the “Holy Ghost.” This paper will provide an overview of pneumatologi-

cal thought, with focus on American Unitarian Universalist pneumatology. Further, the author will argue that, for Unitarian Universalists, the spirit has been a consistent, quiet presence in the faith tradition and is a viable pathway for expressing a uniquely UU sense of the divine. Indeed, a theological emphasis on pneumatology may well best respond to Revered Bill Sinkford's important and controversial call for a "renewed vocabulary of reverence" (Higgins, 2003) among Unitarian Universalists.

Killough and College (1985) note that the term "Spirit" was used fairly consistently in the Old Testament to "designate God's actions in creation and in human events" rather than to suggest an additional person in the Godhead. Early Christian theology focused more on the Father and Son, until a formal doctrine of the Holy Spirit was developed during the 3rd century and then formalized at the Council of Constantinople in 381. As divinity school professor James Luther Adams (1991) wrote in his original 1957 essay on the "Ages of Liberalism," the spirit was "inextricably related to the resurrected, living Christ and also to God the Father" (p. 340). For Christians, the Holy Spirit is the "comforter," leading people to faith in Jesus, giving them spiritual gifts, and enabling them to lead a Christian life ("Pneumatology," n.d.) Based on imagery from Jesus' baptism and the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is often portrayed as a dove or a flame.

While certain branches of Christianity, such as the Pentecostal movement, place special emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, some theologians contend that the Holy Spirit has been underemphasized and is the "weak point" (Snedeker, 1998) in the Trinity.

Similarly, there is relatively little written about Unitarian Universalist pneumatology yet what has been written is fairly consistent over time. In Unitarian churches, the Holy Spirit has never been seen as a separate person but rather as God's active force or God's spirit. As early as 1844, Harvard professor and Unitarian thought leader Andrew Peabody was writing about the spirit as the effect of God on the heart of humankind and about the constant presence of God through the spirit. While convinced that the spirit was not a person, Peabody (1844) also noted that the influence of God on the soul is an "indisputable, essential, fundamental doctrine." Perhaps the most famous articulation of the concept of the spirit in UU history was provided by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841). Even though Peabody was more conservative and opposed the transcendentalist movement, his description of spirit is not unlike that of Emerson. Emerson's essay, "Over-Soul" describes a spiritual connection to something larger than humankind, a sense of an ever-present God, and "varying forms of that shudder of awe and delight with which the individual soul always mingles with the universal soul" (p. 207). In "Worship," Emerson goes on to declare that:

"There is a principle which is the basis of things, which all speech aims to say, and all actions to evolve, a simple, quiet, undescribed, undescrivable presence, dwelling very peacefully in us, our rightful lord. We are not to do, but to let do, not to work, but to be worked upon."

While liberal Christian theology in the later 19th century was rethinking many Christian teachings in light of new knowledge (Dorrien, 2001), Unitarians such as Thomas Starr King (1877) continued to speak about the spirit, arguing that "worship will cease when wonder dies in the heart of man, and when the sense of the infinite is expunged from his soul."

The 1900's saw continued efforts in American Unitarian Universalism to deconstruct traditional notions of God and the supernatural elements of Jesus' life. Criticisms based on feminist and multicultural perspectives, as well as on modern scientific discovery, began during this period and continue to be part of UU thinking today. As Parker (n.d.) notes, "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...." (para. 3). Similarly, current UU theology suggests that Jesus is a prophetic teacher but rejects the notion of his unique divinity. Even Christian Unitarians stress the "religion of Jesus, not about him."

However, Gow (1928) reports that, in early Unitarianism, while there was disagreement in beliefs about God and Jesus, there was "none about the presence of God in the soul" (Gow, 1928, p. x). In a 1925 lecture entitled "Science in the Modern World," Harvard Professor and originator of process philosophy Alfred North Whitehead (as cited in Walton, 1997) described

"The vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal and the hopeless quest." (para 18).

In his brief history of American Unitarian Universalist thought, Christopher Walton (1997) describes the period after World War I as a difficult time for liberal religion in general and American Unitarianism in particular. As he notes, "the shock of the war called into question liberal optimism about human nature and about the possibility of progress in history." The Unitarian Commission of Appraisal in the mid 1930's noted that many UU's disagreed about the traditional vocabulary of religion and yet the 1961 principles adopted by the church still included the wording "love to God" (Robinson, 1985).

Walton (1997) contends that a second "dark night of the soul" arrived in the 1960's and 1970's with a decline in membership and low morale. A survey reported by Robinson (1985) notes that 28% of UU's at the time saw God as an irrelevant concept and only 2.9% believed in God as a supernatural being. As Jack Mendelsohn (1985) points out, our understanding of space weakens our belief in God; "what is out there is perhaps the most significant scientific discovery of our age – infinite geometric space, within which, for practical human purposes, God is silent" (p. 87). However, in the 1960's survey, some were still able to imagine a "god" if presented in a different way. Twenty-three percent agreed with theologian Paul Tillich's famous description of "God" as the "ground of all being," and 44.2% said that the word "God" could be used for natural processes in the universe. Similarly, Mendelsohn (1985), despite his statement that "God is silent," also depicts in his writings a sense of sharing an interdependent destiny with a spiritual universe. Clearly, even as "God" is deconstructed and focus turns to Jesus' humanity rather than his divinity, many UU's still have a deep sense of something more, a presence larger than themselves.

Thus, Unitarian Universalism moved away from liberal Protestantism and toward a more universal religion and/or religious humanism during recent decades. In the 1985 statement of principles adopted by the UUA, the word "God" is absent and Jesus might be glimpsed only in the statement regarding "Christian

teachings which call us to God's love ...” Included now are other religions, Jewish teachings, and humanistic philosophies. While most UU's are pleased with these shifts in their denomination, others raise an issue of how to define “shapeless” religious liberalism while also holding great diversity of views (Robinson, 1985). Some are concerned that a lack of a clearly articulated and commonly held faith makes it difficult to sustain a united institutional Unitarian Universalism (Walton, 1997).

In an open letter to then UUA President Reverend Bill Sinkford, Rebecca Parker (n.d.) suggests that the denomination may be ready to explore a “sense of sacred presence” beyond traditional images of God. She writes that there is still a “source of sustenance, resistance, and hope that moves within us and beyond us” (paragraph 5). She further suggests that a “renewed language of reverence” might mark a turning point from modern to a post-modern expression of Unitarian Universalism. Her letter to Sinkford is consistent with her comments in other settings that Unitarian Universalism is at a turning point in the pneumatological aspect of its theology (Parker, 2002). Parker notes that while some see spirit as something inner or as symbol, others believe the spirit of life is an actual force. Either way, she suggests that spirit language offers a unifying way to talk about the sacred as immanent, and as moving through all things.

Indeed, the first source of the living tradition is essentially one of spirit -- “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” As UU minister Becky Fowler (2004) notes in her sermon on UU pneumatology, contemporary UU thinking rejects the “spirit as an outside all powerful predetermining deity.” Instead, she describes it as “immanent, present in all things, a symbol of creativity, a force operating through all things, perhaps impersonal or neutral” (para. 5).

Prominent liberal theologian and Unitarian Universalist professor James Luther Adams traced the origin of UU conceptualization of the spirit to the Radical Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries (Adams, 1991). A close reading of some of Adam's writing will show that Adams finds the pneumatological movement very much alive in Unitarian Universalism today. His ideas regarding the free church, antihierarchical organizational structures, the meaning of voluntary association in communities, and worship all spring from the “Age of the Spirit.” He describes the free church as a group of people joined by choice in covenant to the holy spirit of love and feels that worship is ideally an experience of renewed allegiance to the spirit of love. He came to believe that “voluntary associations” with the free church or other groups were the primary means of positive social change in society and a way of responding to God's love. Thus, for Adams, the spirit is foundational in the development of UU institutional structures and processes.

While UU theologians continue to disagree with traditional Christians about the personhood of the Holy Spirit, consistencies with more liberal Christian theologians remain. German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, in his 1991 book entitled *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, writes about the experience of the spirit as “an awareness of God in, with, and beneath the experience of life.” He urges that Protestant theology should incorporate a stronger sense of God's presence in nature and an emphasis on human experience as a source for knowledge of the spirit. His description of the experience as “God in all things and the experience of all things in God” (Meeks, 1996) resonates well with Peabody, Emerson, Adams, and other UU

pneumatological theologians. Killough and College (1985) argue that, due to limitations of dualistic thought, a fresh examination of the concept of Spirit in Christian theology is called for. They argue that the Hebrew concept of “ruach” is fully compatible with contemporary scientific theories. Perhaps, ironically, the ancient conceptualization of spirit is the most viable for post-modern times.

In a response to the above mentioned open letter to him, Reverend Bill Sinkford raises two important questions for Unitarian Universalism (Sinkford, n.d.). First, he asks whether UU’s can “name the holy” or “speak of that which transcends our ego” (para 7). Further, he encourages us to ask whether we can engage our Judeo-Christian heritage. “Can we reflect on those stories, using them to help us grow our souls....? Or, because they carry too much emotional baggage, must we avoid the challenge and the wisdom of the tradition out of which we grew?” (para 7) Sinkford offers deep insight when he implies that we must not fully reject our Judeo-Christian roots, but rather find ways to honor that which still can hold meaning for us today. Growing out of the Old Testament, the holy spirit is an important aspect of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Concepts of the spirit have evolved over time and Unitarian Universalism today has a unique sense of pneumatology. Indeed, the “spirit of life” may be a way to embrace an aspect our ancient roots, nurturing them to growth and flowering in a way which is congruent with our contemporary understandings of the divine. Rebecca Parker (2002) closed a lengthy presentation on Unitarian Universalist theology by using the “elements” as a metaphor for the spirit and “house” to represent Unitarian Universalism. She concludes, “Elements never leave a house as it is, but always change it. Our commitment is not to the preservation of our house, but our devotion should be to collaboration with the movement of the spirit in ongoing transformation of our house.”

May it be so.

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