

Why Does It Have To Be So Difficult?  
A talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
5 June 2016  
At First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

## READING

The essayist Susan Sontag wrote,

To be a moral human being is to pay, be obliged to pay, certain kinds of attention. When we make moral judgments, we are not just saying that this is better than that. Even more fundamentally, we are saying that this is more important than that.

It is to order the overwhelming spread and simultaneity of everything, at the price of ignoring or turning our backs on most of what is happening in the world. The nature of moral judgments depends on our capacity for paying attention—a capacity that, inevitably, has its limits but whose limits can be stretched.

## INTRODUCTION

Oh, how we human beings love our dichotomies; polarities; antipodes; antithesis; right / wrong; black and white; either / or; gay /straight; We like the obverse, the reverse, and the converse. Individuality and collectivity. *This* appeals to the heart; *that* appeals to the head. *This* is emotion; *that* is reason. We have branches of science and fields of study.. We have universities full of de-*part*-ments.

It's all about chopping reality up into little comprehensible chunks. We love to slice and dice. Divide and conquer. Break things down into five easy pieces and Twelve Steps. "We murder to dissect," the poet William Wordsworth said. But here's the thing: reality is continuous. This is true of the universe; and it's true of a healthy mind. We take things apart to see how they work . . . then forget that we have taken a knife to it—we look around and say, "What a mess!"

A university where I once worked hired a mathematician just finishing his PhD. I was on the hiring committee, and I asked him what his specialty was, since I couldn't understand what the heck it said on his resume. He gave me a brief explanation, which I also didn't understand. He saw I looked confused and said, "Oh—it's a problem. Only ten or so people in the country understand it."

Now, I know: that's how knowledge advances—a few people who know a whole lot about something very small. But how do we, as a species, put all the little pieces back together again?

As educator and activist bell hooks says,

To commit to love is fundamentally to commit to a life *beyond dualism*. That's why love is so sacred in a culture of domination, because it simply begins to erode your dualisms: dualisms of black and white, male and female, right and wrong.

Chopping things up helps us get our minds around things, but it also fundamentally gets things wrong because it ignores what Susan Sontag called the "overwhelming spread and simultaneity of everything."

Chopping things up leads to reductionism and othering.

The *interdisciplinary* study called systems theory attempts to reverse the trend of increasingly smaller specialties, trying to see the forest rather than the trees, trying to understand complex systems as systems.

Systems thinking leads to concepts such as "intersectionality." It's a theory that says we can't look at only one type of oppression at a time—racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, classism . . . Oppressions add up to something different from their constituent parts.

How, then, do we solve the problem? Well, that's the question, isn't it? But the first step is to see that it IS a big, complex, whole problem.

Why is it that woman view strong female leaders unfavorably at just about the same percentage as men?

It's complex.

Why are the majority of people in prison for drug crimes African Americans from urban areas when most of the drug dealers are Euro-Americans in the suburbs?

Why can't we solve the problem of poverty? Because it is about a whole lot more than not having money . . .

What I want to think about today is how easy it is to fall for the easy answers that dissection provides, yet how in matters of religion, we nearly always go for the difficult and complex answers when simple ones deal best with complexity of reality. Seeing that, I think, can lead us to see the simple grace that the whole of reality offers.

The French philosopher Baron d'Holbach, one of the leading lights of the Enlightenment, who died in 1789, wrote:

Some ancient and modern philosophers have been bold enough to assume experience and reason for their guides, and to shake off the chains of superstition. Democritus, Epicurus, and other Greeks presumed to tear away the veil of prejudice, and to deliver philosophy from theological shackles. But their systems, too simple, too sensible, and too free from the marvelous, for imaginations enamored with chimeras, were obliged to yield to . . . fabulous conjectures . . .

Among the moderns, Hobbes, Spinoza, Bayle, etc., have followed the steps of Epicurus; but their doctrine has found very few followers, in a world, still too intoxicated with fables, to listen to reason.

In every age, it has been dangerous to depart from prejudices.

ONE:

Despite what many conventionally religious people appear to think, humanism does not exist to annoy the pious. At the risk of annoying the conventionally religious, I argue that the study of theology is mostly a study in dissecting the human psyche and defining words—making labels. And, though we are now in a period of serious flux in religion, the traditionally religious will continue to define the language they use as they

wish to define it and claim exclusivity: this is how “god” and “grace” and “love” and “salvation” must be defined.

The last time I checked, the Roman Catholic Catechism was a book large enough to serve as a good doorstop. Roman Catholic tradition has created some very definite definitions.

Take, for example, the term “god.” This term has a very specific meaning in the Roman Catholic Catechism. It’s number thirty-four in the Catechism:

The world, and man, attest that they contain within themselves neither their first principle nor their final end, but rather that they participate in Being itself, which alone is without origin or end. Thus, in different ways, man can come to know that there exists a reality which is the first cause and final end of all things, a reality "that everyone calls God".

Or, those of you who grew up Roman Catholic, perhaps learned this one from the Baltimore Catechism:

2. Q. Who is God?

A. God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things.

13. Q. What is God?

A. God is a spirit infinitely perfect.

For a church that has had more than two thousand years to think about it, these are surprisingly . . . anemic . . . definitions. Besides, it’s demonstrably the fact that this ISN’T what “everyone” calls god—the Hindus, for example, don’t believe that the universe has a beginning or end. What Hindus call “god” is the being that permeates and perpetuates the endless cycles of existence.

Hinduism and Christianity are fundamentally opposed on the question of the wholeness of the universe. Hindus think we can’t divide the universe up in parts—god and not-god. Everything’s god.

Traditional Christianity has taught just the opposite: that god isn't part of the reality we see around us. The Catechism says that humanity and god are fundamentally different. God is outside and beyond it all, a perfect spirit.

So, even within traditional religions, terms get both slippery and sticky. Hindus and Christians don't agree. And that's the tip of the iceberg.

The opposite also occurs: take for instance a term that tries to have no definition at all, such as the quintessentially UU "Oh, Mystery Called By Many Names." This feels dodgy and dishonest to me—because, for example, a Peugeot can be called by many names as well, but it's reasonable to assume that when the need arises to speak about a Peugeot, everyone is talking about a particular sort of automobile.

This is not the case with the term "god."

As you know, my go-to philosopher concerning language use is Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein insisted that the way we divide things up in order to understand them is a language game, not a way to figure out reality.

He best sums up the communal nature of definition and language use with his "beetle in a box" analogy:

Say that everyone has a box and in that box is something that each individual calls "beetle." Others can't see into the boxes of others, only into their own box. How, then, do we know what others call "beetle"?

We can't!

But what we can do is listen to what others say about what they call "beetle" and share what we mean by "beetle." And in this communal sharing, something approximating a definition of "beetle" begins to exist communally. It's not your job to tell me I'm wrong about what I call "beetle;" and it's not my job to tell you that you are wrong about what you call "beetle." We can only learn something by talking with each other.

That's why we need a safe place to share dangerous ideas . . . how else are we ever going to know what we others, and therefore we ourselves, think about those ideas . . .

We have not examined our own meanings until we begin to listen to the meanings that others shut away in their boxes. Meaning is communal.

So, I listen respectfully. But I don't feel that I can use the term "god" with any personal integrity or authenticity. That term just doesn't have much meaning for me. Sure, I can define the god in my box as "the natural order of the universe." But why bother?

For me, the term "god" is a complex answer to some simple questions. But I will keep conversing . . .

TWO:

With all the construction around here, I've been spending a lot of time sitting in traffic recently. And the other day I saw a bumper sticker that said: "It's not a religion / It's a relationship." The bumper sticker was black and white with a little cross on the left side. "It's not a religion / It's a relationship."

My first thought: "good marketing!" That phrase surely comes as the result of research showing that younger people—millennials— are looking for just that: not a religion but a relationship. That's the essence of the "spiritual but not religious" mantra.

Some theologians argue that this personal relationship with the divine is inevitably where US Christianity is going—the trajectory has been away from congregational, covenantal, relationship and toward the personal and individualistic since Europeans first invaded the North American forests.

But here's the question: does a personal relationship with a god have any social benefits at all? Or is that only a relationship with a beetle in a box: solipsistic, individualistic, masturbatory?

The feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir said of her long-time partner, the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, "he can only have satisfactory sex with himself. Only then is he sure he's getting as much pleasure as he's giving."

Beetle in a box!

I *do* think religion—Christianity and otherwise—is about relationship. Always has been. The question is—relationship with *what*. If it's only about giving as much pleasure as it's getting, there's a problem.

I did a little searching on the internet about that bumper sticker and found some Christians arguing specifically against the notion that it's about a personal relationship. Their objection? Making it personal is only half the process. We also must develop a relationship with other human beings—and the world—in a congregation.

Shazam! That's why I had the reaction I did to reading the bumper sticker—good marketing but potentially dangerous religion. Because I deeply believe that good religion has as one of its central points that this whole thing is not about me. It's about us.

Contrary to the sentiment on the bumper sticker, religion *is* relationship. And so is practical philosophy. It's all about reconciling the self to all that is. It's about getting outside of our own stuff and doing something . . . to be better people and to make this world a better place.

There is where the healthy relationship—and healthy religion and philosophy—starts.

## CONCLUSION

Humanism does not exist to annoy the conventionally religious. Humanism exists because it so happens that some of us think the ultimate answers to the ultimate questions are not as complex and difficult as religious traditions claim they are. Humanism is about searching for deep meaning and an authentic way of living life outside of the strictures of conventional religious traditions. And it's about keeping it simple.

For me, anyway, it's simplest to keep in mind that the whole thing . . . is a whole thing —interconnected and complex. And it works as it works. And I'm part of that.

Back to that bell hooks quote:

To commit to love is fundamentally to commit to a life *beyond dualism*. That's why love is so sacred in a culture of domination, because it simply begins to erode your dualisms: dualisms of black and white, male and female, right and wrong.

As Baron d'Holbach asked long ago, why do we need to make claims about what "god" thinks, when it's simpler to look at the world around us and realize how things are? As Bill Nye the Science Guy says: "Everything happens for a reason, and that reason is . . . physics."

The best answer I have found in all the wisdom of the world is that . . . despite all the differences our minds and our cultures can create, *we need to be kind and decent*. That answer really *is* simple, and sensible, and free from supposition and superstition.

Why do that? Because it is the responsible thing for a small part of a greater whole to do.

For me, deep meaning and an authentic way of living are about being decent to others and aiding the planet and living things in their search to live a good life as well. Seriously—it doesn't have to be difficult.

So far as I'm concerned that's the answer. It's not complicated . . . though it is darn difficult to achieve!

But that's my answer—my beetle in my box. You've got to find your own. Not so that I can have a personal relationship with mine and you can have a personal relationship with yours, but so that we can talk about the beetles in our boxes and perhaps come to understand the larger question of "beetleness" together.

The very process of talking, of listening to each other, helps us live up to our higher aspirations, living as kind and decent parts of an indivisible whole.

That's grace.