

That's My Mystery and I'm Stickin' With It
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION

Some of you have seen the TV comedy "The Good Place," a comedic look at the afterlife. In the office of the manager of the Good Place, there is a portrait of a stoner guy on the wall. We learn that this guy, Doug Forcett, was on a mushroom trip in the 1970s when he suddenly described the actual nature of the universe. His description was "92% correct," which has caused him to be a celebrity throughout the universe.

Could be It's a mystery.

Our theme for December is "Mystery: The practice of embracing life with humility and awe."

Two Sundays ago I considered humility and attempted to demonstrate that humbleness is the wise approach to ideas, not only because it's so difficult to know what we really know, but also because it's sometimes the case that what we believe to be true today will be disproven next week.

Last Sunday I looked at awe and how it has (and hasn't) worked in US religious history. After all, in this country, with our attempts at the separation of church and state, awe hasn't been about awesome power or huge buildings. It has been a personal, subjective response.

Remembering this is, I think, important in understanding the role of religions—and the lack thereof—in American life. Last week I talked about a divergence in the conception of deity that occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between the traditional, punishing sort of god that came with the European invasion of this hemisphere—often called "the white guy in the sky"—and the movement toward a "nice Jesus" and a loving god who wants everybody to be happy. The liberal god.

I pointed out that often the difference between believing in a mighty and retributive god and a loving god has a lot to do with social location: poverty and oppression make more sense if your view of divinity relies on a justice-dispensing god.

Speaking broadly, poor and oppressed people tend toward a a mighty and anthropomorphized god, the better off tend toward a more abstract god that often coincides with nature and the cosmos, sometimes to the extent that some people stop believing in god at all.

ONE

I've been using the occasion of considering mystery to look back on the development of liberal religion.

BTW, we do well to remember that prior to the 1970s and the social chasm created by the Vietnam War, being a liberal in religion was mostly about open-mindedness, not politics. However, as the so-called "culture wars" heated up, liberal religion became politically liberal as well.

Let's think about that.

Lists of the most important non-fiction books from the twentieth century always contain *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902 by the philosopher and psychologist William James.

Things were looking bullish for liberal Christianity in 1902. At that time the British Empire with its Christianizing mission was at its height. The United States with its own Christianizing mission was getting into the empire business and building an aspiring middle class. White supremacy and Protestant theology were on the march and, it appeared, the wave of the future.

And William James was soaked in these assumptions. In his book, William James defined "religion" this way:

. . .the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [persons] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.

James defined "the divine" as "any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not." That's about as broad as a definition can get . . .

Now, we can see why James, as a psychologist, would view religion as something going on in the minds of individuals. Meaning and purpose are subjective constructs, after all.

That's also a very *liberal* view, and you can see how liberals, especially Universalists and Unitarians of the time, would immediately pounce on it, since both groups had already developed a creedless tradition that valued individual conscience. In addition, many Universalists and Unitarians were convinced followers of Transcendentalism.

Add to this other liberal movements seeded by Transcendentalism: Theosophy, New Thought (that later turned into New Age), neo-paganism, and the growing number of Westerners intrigued by Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Yes, it appeared that Americans were going their own ways in matters religious.

William James was reporting and reflecting on this trend.

But, William James was underestimating the fact that this liberal, left, individualistic turn was an educated, middle-class phenomenon. (Though the quote from James in your order of service this morning shows that he knew the problem: "Whatever Universe a professor believes in must at any rate be a universe that lends itself to a lengthy discourse." UUs and Humanists are in that same boat.)

Think for a moment about where your forebears were in 1902. (If you know.) Were they in the US? Did they have an education? Could they speak English? Could they read English? Were they anywhere geographically near to proponents of liberal religion?

My four grandparents were young people in 1902. Two of them were completely illiterate – they were sharecroppers. Two of them could read and write a bit – they owned a small family farm.

None of those four read books of theology or philosophy, or even the bible.

How were people like that – which describes *most* people in the US at that time – how were they supposed to go about understanding themselves "in relation to whatever they may consider the divine"?

This situation continued: In the house I grew up in a half-century later, we had two books: the Sears catalogue and the bible. What were people like my parents going to

do with their religious impulses? One thing is for sure: they weren't going to be individualistic about it. They had no resources to do that.

William James, liberal Protestants, and religious experimenters in general – and religious liberals still today – often forget a very important thing about religion: congregations educate. Many, many people cannot “do religion” or philosophy alone. They simply don't have the time or education.

This situation continues today. If you don't believe me, go to a Dollar General Store, Family Dollar, or Dollar Tree and take a look at the bibles for sale. What you will discover is a King James translation, because that translation is both out of copyright (and therefore cheap) and it is considered by many Protestant fundamentalists as the only true translation of scripture.

Another thing you will notice is that the print is so small that it is essentially unreadable. Why? Because for many, many Americans the bible is not a book to be read but a talisman to hold sacred.

(At a twelfth grade reading level, the King James Version is well above the reading level of the average American.)

I suspect that it is no accident that the charismatic, Pentecostal tradition exploded among the poor and the oppressed in the United States at about the same time that William James was writing his book. The black church in its current form came out of that time period; the Pentecostals, Apostolics, Church of God, Church of the Nazarene and on.

One quarter of Americans are now charismatic, and there are now something on the order of six hundred million charismatic Christians on the planet. That in just over a century.

William James – and liberal religion – got it wrong. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the future of religion in the Americas was theirs to lose, and they lost it. The liberal religious movement embraced individuality to the exclusion of most people – in the US and worldwide. This was to have profound consequence that continue today.

So, here's a question for you: How might the liberal, ecumenical, religious tradition attract the poor and oppressed? That's a good question. And not one much discussed in liberal denominations as they wring their hands before the potential collapse of

their traditions. As I mentioned last week, there are now more Wiccans in the United States than there are Presbyterians . . .

In addition, I would argue that the deity most prevalent among liberal Christians today is more Hindu than Christian. And I'm going to tell you why.

TWO

As many of you know, Unitarian Universalism lists Seven Principles and Six Sources. The first Source is

- Direct experience of that 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;

Where does that idea come from? The nineteenth century writer Ralph Waldo Emerson and the idea that he is synonymous with, Transcendentalism.

In 1836 Emerson published a long essay titled *Nature* that became the bible, if you will, of Transcendentalism. The essay begins like this:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

Emerson is talking about awe and where we get it. The Christian tradition that was imported from Europe just won't cut it anymore, claims Emerson. Only an "original relation to the universe" will do.

Today is Beethoven's birthday, so we should remember that Emerson's idea had been floating around in Europe for a generation, called Romanticism there.

Back in 1798 the British poet William Wordsworth had written,

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;

Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

...

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

(from "The Tables Turned")

Forget preachers and books, it's all about direct experience—letting “nature be your teacher.”

Added to that insistence on direct experience was a concept that the Transcendentalists were learning from Hindu texts that were just beginning to trickle into the Western world at that time due to the British occupation of India.

The Transcendentalists called what had previously been called “god,” the “oversoul.” Different Transcendentalists understood this in different ways, and I’m not sure they really grasped the actual Hindu (specifically Vedanta) concept, but the idea is that everything is god. The whole shebang of the cosmos. Material existence is a manifestation *out of* the spiritual, the Cosmic Consciousness, as the oversoul is called nowadays.

Here’s how they thought it works: When we are born, a little piece of the cosmic consciousness—the oversoul—goes into our bodies; when we die, that consciousness rejoins the cosmic consciousness—that’s the afterlife. In between birth and death the material world beats us up—hunger, lust, greed, fear, work . . . all those things are there to make us forget that we are spiritual beings—that actually we are part of god.

This idea is the source of the poet William Wordsworth’s famous phrase, “the child is father to the man”—the child is the *wiser one* because the child is closer to the source, the cosmic consciousness.

And so we meditate to get past those physical wants and needs and fears and all the fuss and bother of life and re-realize that we are manifestations of god. (This was, btw, in no way, shape, or form what Christians of the day thought to be true.)

This idea is the source of my favorite bit of Romantic verse, Percy Shelley's meditation on the death of the poet John Keats. It goes like this:

LII

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die,
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!
Follow where all is fled! . . .

This is where most religiously liberal of people were in 1902. Many people—oddly and paradoxically including most liberal Protestants—are there today: it's their mystery, and they're stickin' with it.

CONCLUSION

Now, the skeptics among us say, hold up a minute. That's all very nice, but what's called "the soul" is really consciousness, and why would the universe have consciousness?

Consciousness is an adaptive trait of living things, and why would the universe need a consciousness to survive? Actually, we skeptics say, the universe is only a big explosion that we happen to be in the middle of.

Furthermore, even if the universe *does* have a consciousness, what would lead us to believe that that consciousness even notices or *likes* human beings? Maybe we're just cosmic bottom-feeders. Or perhaps god actually prefers dolphins.

That's why I named my talk today "That's My Mystery and I'm Stickin' With It." We don't know the answers to these questions, and I suspect humankind never will.

We inheritors of a long line of liberal religious thinkers think we're right. But our ideas come with so much history and so much baggage, as do all belief systems.

Mystery persists.

Perhaps the ancient so-called pagans were right; perhaps the ancient Hindus were right. Perhaps the Buddhists or Taoists or Hebrews or Christians or Muslims. Or perhaps we've already killed off the one rainforest tribe that actually knew the true answer.

Maybe . . .

Or perhaps the British writer Douglas Adams got it right in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and the answer is . . .

42. In which case, it's the question that we don't know, not the answer.

It's a mystery.

A motif though the Hitchhiker series is "Don't panic." And that's probably the best advice we can get in this life.

Nobody knows the deepest answers. It's a mystery.

And I invite us all to be good with that.

SOURCES

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, as quoted in "Each Attitude a Syllable" by Lindsey V. Reckson in *American Religious Liberalism*, ed. Leigh E. Schmidt and Sally M. Promey, page 303; Indiana UP, 2018.

Education levels in the US: <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/education-news-roundup/illiteracy-in-america/>

<http://thegoodplace.wikia.com/wiki/Doug>