

Mystery

It's What We Don't Know

James T. Dooley Riemermann



Quaker Universalist Fellowship

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Daniel Seeger, Treasurer
Quaker Universalist Fellowship
168 Woodside Drive
Lumberton, NJ 08048
Email: treasurer@universalistfriends.org
Website: www.universalistfriends.org

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Editor's Introduction

James Riemermann is a member of Twin Cities Friends Meeting in St Paul, Minnesota, and has served on the steering committee of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship. Although his reflections here are addressed to the nature of reality and the origins of the Western monotheistic tradition, they also, by implication, raise questions about the nature and boundaries of Quaker universalism and the place of nontheism in relation to it.

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Rhoda R. Gilman

Mystery: It's What We Don't Know

There is enough mystery in an acre of land—indeed, in the patch of soil beneath your feet as you stand in your garden—to hold the human race in awe until the day of our extinction. The more we learn about the complex and subtle dynamics of life, matter and energy that dance everywhere we look, the clearer it becomes that the old scientific dream of complete understanding is just that—a dream. The way of science has made discoveries of immense importance, and will presumably continue to make them, but at every turn the path of scientific discovery shows us even greater mysteries—which is to say, more things we are aware of but don't understand.

The past century of discoveries in atomic and subatomic physics reveals that the most physically dense objects in our everyday world are made almost entirely of empty space, in which infinitesimal particles whirl around one another at unimaginable speeds. At the smallest scale, we cannot tell whether some of these are particles or non-particle waves, or both simultaneously, or either depending on our method of observation. Our attempts to measure the movement of some of these particles seem to suggest that they exist in many locations simultaneously, further challenging our notions of what speed, space and matter are, along with Einstein's hallowed and well-tested rule that nothing can exceed the speed of light. None of the rules that hold in our everyday world seem to hold here. The qualities we perceive in the everyday objects before us relate as much to patterns of energy, and complex relationships between infinitesimal particles, as to distinct qualities of the objects themselves.

Following Einstein, our intuitive sense that physical objects move through essentially passive and substanceless fields of space and time is shattered. Rather, objects warp the space and time they move through, and objects of sufficient mass and density— theoretically, and perhaps in reality—can stop time completely. It is widely held that our universe began when an infinitely small point of frozen time exploded, and started the clock of our physical reality. The same theories project that our universe may end in another point of frozen time.

Of all the mysteries which resist our intelligence, perhaps the greatest is the one that gave rise to intelligence and mystery itself: consciousness. Or, more precisely, self-awareness—the usually unshakeable sense we have of ourselves as distinct beings.

Human beings know the experience of having or being a “self ” more intimately than we know anything else; everything else we say we know is an assumption based on the subjective experience of that self. We have methods for distinguishing between those experiences that reflect the external world, and those that reflect the inner world of the mind, but those methods are imperfect, and in some forms of mental illness they disintegrate. In fact, as noted earlier, the physical world is not really the way we perceive it except in a vague, analogical sense. Color is not what we perceive it to be, nor the solidity of objects, nor the intuitive distinction we make between time and space.

Neurological studies demonstrate beyond any doubt the essential connection between the biological and chemical processes of the brain, and consciousness. It is no great trick to elicit certain types of mental experiences by stimulating certain parts of the brain, and moods can be changed in radical ways by introducing chemicals into the body which affect receptor sites within the brain. Studies of brain-damaged patients show how physical alteration of the brain can radically alter everything a person considers to be their “self”. In more extreme cases of brain damage the self all but disappears. There is no objectively certain way to confirm this, but everything we have learned suggests

that, with the total cessation of any chemical activity in the brain, the self ceases to be.

At the same time, it would be a gross overstatement to say we know what the self is, or the mind, or self-awareness. We can associate such mental phenomena with biological events in a fairly crude manner, but we don't *really* have the foggiest idea why we experience these phenomena, or if we could function without them, or at what point in our evolution from single-celled organisms to modern human beings we first reflected on our own existence—at which point everything changed.

Yet, for most of the human race, this unfathomable mystery of the natural world has apparently not been mystery enough. Throughout the centuries we have felt compelled to assert the existence of an unknown realm of mystery beyond that of the realm we can hold in our hands, see with our eyes, taste with our tongues, reflect upon with our minds. There must be something more, we insist. A transcendent mind, a power behind everything. For want of a better term, God.

Virtually every mature religious tradition has had its popular versions, drenched in magical thinking and superstition, and these versions have been the essence of religious life for most people at most points in known history. In the Christian tradition, the popular versions have tended to envision God as a human-like being of unlimited power, goodness and knowledge, who knows and loves each of us personally, and guides the world perfectly (with some wiggle room for human free will, which comes in handy to explain the existence of suffering in a world ruled by such a good god.)

Most, if not all, religions have also had their mystical traditions which, while not necessarily rejecting theological specifics and supernatural beliefs, tend to spend more time focusing on practices intended to evoke direct experience of

the divine or transcendent realm. Even if this mystical tradition is the far lesser tradition in terms of numbers, one could make a strong case that the greatest spiritual leaders and writers in religious history have followed the mystical thread of their religion. One could also make a strong case that the greatest scriptural works were created as poetry, dealing with the experience of being human in the world, and only later were taken to be historical accounts of an actual God.

Today's best-known progressive Christian writers, along with many Quakers, follow this mystical thread. One might oversimplify such beliefs as "soft theism," where most of the specific claims of traditional or orthodox Judeo-Christian theism are dismissed, or perhaps ignored—angels, heaven, hell, a human-like being who created and guides the world we live in and loves each of us in a personal manner, prayer as a method for bringing about desired events and keeping disaster from the door. At the same time, soft theism tends to retain faith in the broadest and most comforting aspects of the old belief systems: the universe exists for a beneficent purpose, and our existence has an ultimate meaning that will not end with our death, nor even with the end of the human race.

The point of this criticism is not to prove such claims to be false. They cannot be proven false, and in fact the less specific the language used to express the claims, the less meaning words such as "true" or "false" have. If one experiences life in the world to be meaningful, that is one's experience. One could then question whether that experience reflects the nature of the world outside of human experience, but what of it? We are human, are we not? Rather, the point is to explore the possible motivations for such beliefs. Have we reached toward truth (meaning, that which is the case) with all our strength, or is the well-documented human desire for comfort and security distracting us in our search for truth?

One motivation might be that the notion of a purposeful creator might serve to explain how such a fantastically complex

and interrelated universe could have come to be. Rather than resign ourselves to partial, finally unsatisfying answers about the birth and nature of the universe, we can comfort ourselves that, whatever the details of creation, it unfolded because of the creative will of God. What had brought forth a frustrating sense of bafflement, is seen through faith as the perfect plan of a perfect will.

The trouble is, while such a faith might ease our discomfort and confusion, nothing has been explained at all. Everything we didn't know before, we still don't know. By saying God created it all, we have answered no questions, but merely added to the long list of things we can't explain another huge, unexplainable entity: the creator.

* * *

The most progressive modern theology is boldly stretching the boundaries of that perspective. Bishop John Shelby Spong, while expressing faith in something he chooses to call God, expressly rejects the long-standing theistic image of God as a distinct entity with a personality, and even more vehemently rejects the notion of a God who rewards good and punishes bad behavior, and the image in Genesis of a humanoid super-being who magically creates a world and has conversations with its denizens.

In *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* Spong spells out in painful detail the historical battering of the theistic notion of God, first by Copernicus, then by Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Freud and Einstein. First to fall, Spong observes, is the notion of a realm in the sky in which God resides, ruling over Earth as the center and Crown of Creation. Further discoveries underscored how insignificant Earth and humanity is in the context of the physical universe, and how humanity itself—in all likelihood the only species on Earth to conceive of God—evolved over eons from microscopic organisms without minds or hearts. Then, the

exploration of the human mind dismissed the notion that our morality was handed down by the creator and ruler of the universe. Spong writes,

The theistic definition of God as a personal being with expanded supernatural, human, and parental qualities, which has shaped every religious idea of the Western world, came into existence not through divine revelation, Freud argued, but out of human need. Today this theism is collapsing. The theistic God has no work to do. The power once assigned to this God is now explained in countless other ways. The theistic God is all but unemployed.

This is a bold theological move, firmly rejecting traditional notions of God, and, in contrast with other progressive theological writers such as Karen Armstrong and Marcus Borg, acknowledging that these magical, anthropomorphic notions are, in fact, traditional and ancient. A disconcerting tendency among Armstrong, Borg, and others, is to assert that literalistic notions of God are a relatively modern innovation brought forth by the scientific mindset, rather than the more obvious explanation that the scientific mindset is still in the slow process of destroying a literalistic mindset that had dominated religion for millennia. Armstrong writes in *A History of God* that "...once the scientific spirit had become normative for many people, it was difficult to read the Gospels in any other way. Western Christians were now committed to a literal understanding of their faith and had taken an irrevocable step back from myth: a story was either factually true or it was a delusion." Later, critiquing the theology of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, she writes that "God comes across as callous, self-righteous and entirely lacking in the compassion that his religion was supposed to inspire. Forcing God to speak like one of us in this way shows us the inadequacies of such an anthropomorphic and personalist conception of the divine. There are too many contradictions for such a God to be either coherent or worthy of

eneration.” It’s a fair criticism, but one that can be even more easily levelled against the Bible.

Armstrong rightly calls attention to a long mystical religious tradition that warns against focusing on literalistic images of God, and which advocates an approach of myth, mystery, and direct religious experience that intentionally defies direct description. What she seems to overlook is, these mystical traditions were never representative of the mainstream of religious belief, but rather were critiques of a mainstream that was for the most part intensely idolatrous and literalistic. The fact that myth and mystery played a crucial role in the great monotheistic religions does not mean that their adherents did not believe in the literal existence of the largely anthropomorphic God of *Genesis* and *Exodus*, or the Biblical characters who had occasional conversations with the creator of the universe. If there’s one thing we know about almost all ancient cultures, it is this: they liked their magic.

Similarly, Marcus Borg, in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, writes that

The modern worldview, derived from the Enlightenment, sees reality in material terms, as constituted by the world of matter and energy within the space-time continuum. The experience of spirit persons [such as Jesus, in this example] suggests that there is more to reality than this—that there is, in addition to the tangible world of our ordinary experience, a nonmaterial level of reality, actual even though nonmaterial, and charged with energy and power. The modern worldview is one-dimensional; the worldview of spirit persons is multidimensional. Moreover, this other reality, it is important to emphasize, is not ‘somewhere else.’ Rather, it is all around us, and we are in it.

Like Armstrong, Borg implies that the rise of scientific understanding gave rise to literalistic religious understandings,

rather than the far simpler explanation that the scientific understanding of the enlightenment was undermining an ancient, literalistic understanding of God as a being in the sky, an understanding which has been fighting desperately for its life ever since. Before that, the existence of a literal, personal God was rarely questioned, though often augmented with a more mystical understanding.

Spong, who readily admits that Western religions have always been magical, superstitious and literalistic in practice, nonetheless seems to fall a bit short of grasping the full implications of his rejection of theism and superstition. Again, in *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, he writes:

If God is no longer to be conceived of as a ‘personal other,’ does that mean that the core and ground of all life is impersonal? Does this make God less than personal or mysteriously even more than personal yet still beyond our limited human categories and understandings? Such questions ultimately cannot be answered. They do, however, elicit a series of other questions. Does not the being of God manifest itself in intense personhood? Can one worship the Ground of Being in any other way than by daring to be all that one can be? Can one worship the source of Life in any other way than by daring to live fully? Can one worship the Source of Love in any other way than by daring to love wastefully and abundantly? Are there any categories that could be said to be more personal than those calling each of us into being, into living, and into loving? Would a life that reflected these qualities not be seen to reveal the image of God that is within that person?

These questions are purely rhetorical, in the sense that Spong implies his preference for answers that suggest a universal force of love. The first two questions are skeptical at a glance, and Spong dismisses them as “unanswerable,” meaning we cannot

answer “yes, God, the Ground of Being, is impersonal”. The rest of the questions are hopeful, and it is clear that Spong desperately wants to answer “yes, God, the Ground of Being, is personal and loving”. For the moment he stops short of giving that answer outright, but in the epilogue of the book he gets over his caution and states: “God, the source of love, calls us all to love wastefully.” Good advice indeed, but in fact it is Bishop Spong, not the Ground of Being, who offers it. Spong rejects the traditional, theistic conceptions of God, but in the end nostalgia overcomes him, and he cannot bring himself to reject the unsupported but comforting notion that God, the Ground of Being, loves us.

* * *

A common theist critique of nontheism is that disbelief in “something more” reflects the arrogant assumption that what humans can see and measure is the be-all and end-all of reality. On the contrary, no reasonable nontheist, atheist, agnostic, humanist, naturalist—believes that human knowledge encompasses all of reality, or even comes close. It is the scientific worldview that utterly depends on a keen, rigorous and critical distinction between what we know, and what we do not know. What we can observe, examine, grasp, measure—that is what human beings can know. The rest we cannot know. A claim to knowledge of a realm beyond the one we live in, on the other hand, could be described as arrogance. If in fact there is some divine realm apart from the world we live in, all we can honestly say about that realm is that we do not know it, because we do not live in it. We live in the physical world. A world which, once again, contains enough mystery to keep us in awe forever.

Before Galileo could overturn the Genesis-inspired conception of Earth as the center of the universe, he had to humbly admit that he did not know where the earth was, regardless of what he had been led to believe for all his life. Then he observed the sky with great care, and shared the story it told him.

A distinction must be made, too, between “*something* beyond our knowledge” and “*things* beyond our knowledge”. The former doesn’t merely acknowledge that there is a great deal that we do not understand—an obvious truth. It implies that, at some level, the highest or most fundamental level, there are not diverse and interrelated truths, but One Transcendent Truth. This claim is made despite the fact that everything we have learned about the world reflects not unity but diversity and relationship—distinct, powerful and subtle forces that wrestle, dance and collide with one another. In all but a few tiny corners of the universe, this violent crashing has come to nothing we would value. In rare places such as our earth, the crashing results in a breathtaking dynamic equilibrium in the exchange of energy, where success builds on previous success, and the web of life struggles against the entropy that will eventually destroy it. Almost everywhere else, entropy has already won. So, of course there are things beyond our knowledge, many of which will remain so forever: the origins of the Big Bang; the function and origin of many subatomic particles; exactly how it happens that we experience thought, sensation, emotion; the scientifically unsupportable but crucially human sense that one is a person with a soul.

One might ask, what does all this mystery mean? Many who profess some sort of faith in God insist it *must* mean something, that beyond the veil of everything that baffles us there must be “something more,” something unified, coherent, and above all, meaningful. The mysteries themselves are trotted out as evidence for the existence of this unspecified “something more”. (As Hamlet said, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy”. By which he meant that Horatio should believe in ghosts.)

But why? Why would that which is beyond the veil of mystery be any more “divine” or “ultimate” or “spiritual” than that which we already know? The veil of mystery is simply the limits of our knowledge. There is the stuff we know about, and the stuff we

don't know about. There is no particular reason to believe that the stuff we don't know about is any more divine than, say, a rock, or a chicken, or a Ford Fiesta. So the distinction between that which we understand or have direct experience of, and that which is forever beyond our knowledge, is by no means the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material. It certainly provides no evidence of a transcendent realm. It is good and interesting and sometimes even fruitful to humbly reflect on the depth and breadth of our ignorance, but to take what we don't know and mystify it as divine is not likely to be fruitful.

So, then, is it meaningless to speak of the sacred, the spiritual, the holy, in our lives? Or is there a genuine and naturalistic way of speaking about the most rare and beautiful aspects of our lives without implying that we have thereby uncovered the ultimate meaning of the universe, or that the universe loves us? I think that there is.

* * *

Rarely do I feel led to use the word "God" to describe anything I experience, though I often relate deeply to what many fellow Quakers describe as God. Part of my reluctance stems from the fact that the word feels so terribly imprecise, and I can almost always find better ways to express myself. It's not a matter of simply replacing the word God with another phrase (the Divine, the Inward Light, the Christ Within, Love, the Ground of Being) but of taking all the language at my command and struggling to express how the world seems to me. Even then I come up short; the words rarely if ever capture the experience, but they come far closer than any timeworn, hand-me-down phrase that is likely to mean a thousand different things to a thousand different people.

When the most thoughtful believers speak to me of God, it almost always comes through to me as a heightened awareness

of relationship. Grammatically, God is a being, an entity, but what Friends tend to describe as God seems more like an event, an encounter, that occurs when a self-aware individual becomes intensely aware of relationship—with another human being, with a community of Friends, with the complex web of beings and resources that sustain life on earth, with the sun that feeds energy to that web, with the entire cosmos out of which emerged absolutely everything we value. What a breathtaking moment is that encounter! Here I am, living my life as if I were a single soul, a person, a mind mysteriously sprung from a physical body. And in an instant it dawns on me that I am not just myself. On the contrary, the energy of the universe flows through me, and at my death will pass through me and back into everything that exists! My God! This is no metaphor, there is nothing magical or supernatural about it, nor is it something more out there with which I can occasionally commune. Rather, it is the essential, undeniable, literal, constant reality of being human in the real world. We are a part of everything, and it is all linked together.

For the moment, let's call it God. It may or may not be eternal, but it certainly began long before I was born, before life of any kind emerged, and it will live well beyond all of us. What, then, is the experience of God? As mentioned earlier, everything we have learned about the mind powerfully suggests that it is inextricably linked to the physical brain. When the brain is altered, happy people become sad, brilliant people become dull, gentle people become angry and violent, and sometimes entire personalities vanish without a trace. There is every reason to believe that our experience of God—that is, everything we can possibly know of God—will end with the death of our bodies. And when there are no more conscious creatures in the universe, there will be no experience of God. As far as anyone is concerned, no God. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

And there goes hope, there goes eternity, there goes nostalgia, there goes the happy ending we all yearn for. It will not do to pretend we are not disappointed. Part of that ineffable

mystery of self-awareness is a built-in longing for eternity, for a connection with ultimate meaning. We don't know why we have it, but we have it. It will not do to deny that longing, nor to nostalgically pretend we have not learned what we have learned.

Yet, right now, for a while, we have ourselves, we have each other, and we have the world. The vast, quite possibly meaningless universe out of which we emerged, and into which we will dissolve, is in our hearts, our minds and our souls, alive with meaning.

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