

**Rev. John T. Crestwell, Jr.**  
**12-9-18**

**SERMON:**  
**Does God Exist?**

Does God exist? By show of hands, how many of you believe in God? If I change the word god to “force” or “Creative Power” in the cosmos how many would raise their hands?

What if I say this: How many of you believe that this power is personal meaning it acts in your life and in history?

How many of you would say I don’t know whether there’s a god?

How many of you would say it doesn’t matter?

How many don’t care at all? ☺

Well I won’t make you wait 20 minutes before giving you my answer. Does God exist? For me I say YES and NO... Amen. End of sermon. Enjoy the Xmas music...

YES, God exists to me because I feel an overarching presence in my life and over the planet even as things seem chaotic in many places. This is intuited (sensed) and just in my gut. YES God exists to me because I see it, smell it, taste it and touch it. Notice I said IT. God exists to me as a pantheistic IT that does indeed energetically shifts us toward the good. I do attribute all of this to an intelligent First Cause as Aristotle put it. Something put the universe(s) in motion in my opinion. Also, the synchronicities, the weird coincidences, the strange unexplainable miracles—these I attribute to that same First Cause. However, I also think there could be a God or even gods involved in this creative process. What if it’s a higher version of ourselves? In my early years, my 20’s, I did not like the end of one of my favorite poems “Invictus” (meaning unconquerable) by William Ernest Henley because of his use of the word gods (I’d change the text to God every time I recited it) but now I have an appreciation for his boldness and tenacity when he wrote passionately on life and death: “I thank whatever gods may be for my

unconquerable soul.” He felt there was something or some things that gave him the perseverance and courage to say I’m not afraid of LIFE or DEATH! And I like that. Living nearly 50 years and now entering that phase of life where I experience the death of friends—some of those death’s being tragic—it’s hard for me to not want to find God and a message that will explain it all.

Conversely, NO God doesn’t exist for me because tragic events seem unfair and ungodly. Why would an omnipotent force allow that? There’s too much evil in the world. What God would make a world like this? NO God does not exist if God is a HE and HE is a mere man—a European man-- sitting on a throne as judge of the planet. This anthropomorphic God is outmoded and does not exist for me. God does not exist if God “smites” his enemies in the name of love. That’s not my God. God does not exist because something magically combined, combusted and created cause and effect as we know it—including the big bang. It just happened because the elements were right and the moment was ripe. There is no First Cause—just the primordial elements always in motion in space in their intergalactic laboratory. God does not exist if there are chosen people unless all chosen. I can go with that. God does not exist if HE acts in history and allows any professional sports team to beat my teams in DC and Maryland. Amen.

YES, God exists. And NO God doesn’t exist is my answer. As you can hear, understanding whether God exists or not is all about one’s personal context and experience. This question is just too BIG for a simple answer; and how God has been used by humans historically is a big reason we must use solid judgement and discernment with this question. But the question is personal, indeed. Your relationship with IT, LIFE is your business. We respect that as UUs and it’s one of the main reasons I joined this faith. It gave me the space to safely ask questions about God, nature and all reality. Questions that I could not ask in the church I grew up in.

Context...If someone asks you the question do you believe in God? You can ask them a question: What does your version of God like? Or tell me about your version of God. I've always liked the AA terminology "God of your understanding. "Of MY understanding." The who, what, when, where, why and how of God is in the eye of the beholder. Historically, those who are persuasive enough or have the power have sold us on their version of God—God in their image; and generally these squeaky wheel folk over the centuries are heard the most in society even if what they say is manipulative and false. But understandings of GOD are as vast as the ocean. When people use the word they are attempting to describe the mysteries that make us say WOW—and there are so many!

I believe we are born seekers. Human curiosity is special. It drives us and pushes us to ask tough, perplexing questions in our search for meaning amidst the madness and magnificent.

The Christmas story of Jesus' birth is a story of madness and magnificence; a story of wonder and mystery. This holiday brings us back to an old story that is some combination of myth and truth and we know not which is which. That's why Christmas is celebrated as both to accommodate the secular and sacred. The paradox of the question about the existence of God (YES and NO) is exactly what we have with the story of the birth of Jesus. It's a literal and figurative story. Meant to bring us back to the good, the meaningful and special. As UUs we choose to believe that every child that is born is as special as Yesuha ben Nazareth, deserving of gifts, support, and love—that every child has the capacity to change (even save) the world!

That is why I used the little book during Wonder Box about the 30 Universal Declarations of Human Rights. Written in 1948, this powerful humanistic statement was born at a "special" time—when the world was coming out of one of its darkest moments. The light shined. Hope came again through this document and voices from all over the world helped craft it. After evil had manifested for a short time, our higher angels again prevailed. Good does seem to come out

of bad. When you look at the trajectory of history it does appear that the moral arc bends toward justice...and what is that? Where does that invisible momentum toward the good come from?

The late Russian philosopher Leo Tolstoy said that it is our deep desire for ‘moral improvement’ that drives this. Where does that come from? Seeking to do and be better, striving for excellence, building a better thing is innate, he thought. And/or perhaps we learn from messing up again and again individually as a species, and therefore our eventual response to suffering is to finally do the right, just, and moral thing because that’s all that’s left? Multiple possibilities exist.

We tend to think in dichotomies—YES or NO but really life is a both/and proposition. Is everything just a random conversion or combustion of chemicals, elements and particles that create our cause and effect reality? AND is everything also put in motion by a First Cause. “Let there be light—and there was light....BOOM! Not either or but both/and.

But it is interesting... If you look at who says “YES God exists”, you find a clear link between those from Europe being more secular (SAYING NO to the question) and those from everywhere else not quite as non-theist. Pew research shows that, on this question, the first 11 European countries surveyed were clearly a-third (1/3) or more secular or non-religious. Americans came in really low we are still very much a GOD country—only 8% were non-believers in God.

Again the survey didn’t ask ‘what do you mean by the term God’—so there are limits here...

However, the numbers clearly show that the vast majority of the world believes in some version of God. And here’s my point: *where you find God least is in places that were heavily involved on the world stage with war and Christian dogma early one and holy wars, conquest and manifest destiny.... Historically speaking, Europeans, in my opinion, exhausted themselves in their relationship with God and religion. But note this: the first 11 countries that were 1/3 secular were also very privileged countries as well. So, there may be a correlation between*

***“one’s definition of God or belief in God and one’s social environment or status. Another thing to add to the puzzle!***

Since we are discussing Europe—which, as Americans, is where we get most of our theological and philosophical underpinnings, I find it interesting that some of the great European minds of the past were wrestling with similar questions. Friday I had coffee with Karin Dworkin who teaches philosophy at AACC and she reminded me that asking “Does God exist” and seeking an answer is a profound question that can literally blow your mind. Some of the great teachers in Europe went insane in their analysis, some took their own lives, but all of them made us think.

**SLIDE:** Immanuel Kant 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century said that it’s impossible to prove the existence of God but felt God existed because of the order he witnessed in physical laws evident in nature. He said this: “God has put a secret art into the forces of nature so as to enable it to fashion itself out of chaos into a perfect world system.”

**SLIDE:** Russian, Leo Tolstoy 20<sup>th</sup> Century Philosopher said— *“The essence of any religion lies solely in the answer to the question: why do I exist, and what is my relationship to the infinite universe that surrounds me?”*

He continues in the vein of Kant: ‘Everything develops, differentiates, moving towards complexity and refinement and there are laws governing this process. You are part of a whole. When you know as much as possible about the whole, and about the laws of its development, you will understand your place in the whole, and your own self.’ (Leo Tolstoy, Confessions, 1882)

**SLIDE:** Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19<sup>th</sup> century said, “God is dead” which to me is an early description of our time. In his day Nietzsche was describing the change of a Euro-centric Christian worldview toward one that was based on science and reason. This “death of God” he felt undermined the moral order. In other words, in his understanding, there is no moral or

natural order that can be understood without context and that context—in his time was fundamentally Christian. With the rise of science, he was saying, “If society accepts this then the old God you once revered is dead. He was spot on!

The great teachers always help... You see, we create concepts of God out of our own context. When that context disappears or changes our idea of God or no god must shift too. Belief is not stagnant but flowing, resolving, and evolving. None of us should ever get stuck in our beliefs. If we are stuck we are not asking enough questions.

Nietzsche is right I think. In some ways God has been left behind. In some ways God is going through and is always going through a makeover. As UUs we are a part of a living (not stagnant) tradition. We’ve attempted to put a post-modern twist on God using words like Spirit of Life, Great Spirit, Force, Eternal Love, Life Energy; and my favorite is Creative Sustaining Force—we’ve put a post-modern twist on God so we don’t use the word that much here today. But we can—or NOT....And still that POWER exists above the words. Whether expressed through Humanism or Hinduism that essence is still there.

We know now that Nietzsche was only partly right. God has died and been reborn again and again. So God did not die because of science. In some ways God has been enhanced by science. But look around, God is getting a makeover all over the planet. IT (God) is no longer subject to the whims and failings of Christianity or any big religion. IT bursts out the box time and time again saying “I cannot be contained!” The Spirit of Life is bigger than that. The Force is using science and religion as a vehicle for its continued emergence. It matters not whether we believe IT exists or not.

So the question “Does God exist” is not essential today. It’s a provocative sermon topic that I hope helped you decide to come to church today but it is subjective. But there’s another

question: What do you mean by God? Tell me about *why you do or don't believe in God* and I'll see if I agree. Let's find the places we agree and start there...And that's where you will find the good or God or that sweet essence in life. The answers if they're there, come outside the YES and NO. **SLIDE UP:** Beyond the dichotomy. When you move beyond the dichotomy you tap into the higher-self. When you're ready to emerge beyond the EITHER OR. BLACK WHITE, UP DOWN...to the both/and reality then you see miracles like we saw in 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When we are able to see each other's holiness or humanness in its fullness then IT emerges. God comes, LOVE comes and shows itself as "no respecter of persons". When we move toward non-judgment and self-understanding and not needing all the answers and surrendering to the questions, then we began to be the true architect of our life; and the God inside—that ethereal fire of commitment transforms our lives again and again. Miracles happen.

Since I've surrendered to the question I have felt free. The great thinkers on God many lived tortured lives. I would say to them as I say to you in the words of the Taoist Bruce Lee: "Don't look at the finger or you will miss all the heavenly glory." We focus so much on a thing—on needing to know that we miss the miracles happening all around. We are swimming in the ambiguity of God and it is beautiful! Some have to learn how to float in the ethereal ocean.

I think Emerson had a similar experience. In his writing of the "Oversoul" he sees humanity as one—many small "o" souls-- created and ever-connected to the big "O" "Oversoul". You may not have this revelation if you are stuck in the yes and no. Emerson had moved beyond the dichotomy with his questions... And he gets the last word. He said this, as I close:

**SLIDE UP:** *"The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth. We know truth when we see it, let sceptic and scoffer say what they choose. Foolish people ask you, when you have spoken what they do not wish to hear, "How do you know it is truth, and not an error of your own?" We know the truth when we see it, from opinion, as we know when we are awake that we are awake. It was*

*a grand sentence of Emanuel Swedenborg, which would alone indicate the greatness of that man's perception—"It is no proof of a man's understanding to be able to confirm whatever he pleases; but to be able to discern that what is true is true, and that what is false is false—this is the mark and character of intelligence." In the book I read, the good thought returns to me, as every truth will, the image of the whole soul. To the bad thought which I find in it, the same soul becomes a discerning, separating sword, and lops it away. We are wiser than we know. If we will not interfere with our thought, but will act entirely, or see how the thing stands in God, we know the particular thing, and every thing, and every man. For the Maker of all things and all persons stands behind us and casts his dread omniscience through us over things."*

Blessings to you during this holiday season. May it be so. Amen.