



Bylaws, Branding and the Bifurcation of the Unity Movement Part 3

Hi Friends -

Let me introduce you to four actual people, each who have different experience of God in their lives. The following four paragraphs are taken, almost verbatim, from other writers, who I will credit further down in this post.



- **God is directly active in the life and affairs of Peggy.** Peggy, and others like her, have fascinating stories of how God presents her with worldly gifts and responds to her prayers with money or some other direct assistance. A mother of four who lives in rural Texas, Peggy writes, “He flushed my toilet one time. I was living overseas and I didn’t have a garbage disposal or a sink. My bathroom was where I would wash my dishes and I had left some rice in a Tupperware container too long ... it got clogged in the toilet and it just sat there ... and so I just started to pray and as soon as I started to pray it just flushed.”
- **God does not intervene in the affairs of Chuck, but God does speak directly to him, providing Chuck with extraordinary guidance and supernatural knowledge.** People like Chuck emphatically declare that they “know God.” He writes “I talk and think to God, and He flashes His ideas into my mind. I am not deluded. I know His thoughts from the thoughts of men as they pass through the mental atmosphere. He also talks to me in certain dreams. I can distinguish these dreams from the other dreams. Repeated thinking about the presence of God makes Him increasingly plainer to my inner vision.”
- **God’s presence and activity are less direct for Tom, who believes that acts of God should be thought of as a metaphor for the effect of our church and friends on our lives.** Individuals like Tom tend to describe God as a “cosmic force.” Tom, a middle-aged Presbyterian deacon, says “Weekly worship is without question an act of God in my life [and are] evidences of his activity in my life. As far as any clearly miraculous events? Never.” While Tom is a clearly devoted church member, his belief is more abstract than that of Peggy or Chuck. Tom’s God certainly does not flush toilets, nor does he directly speak directly to Tom, but God can be felt within the rituals of Tom’s religious life, and in those moments of religious expression, God is real.
- **God is not part of any particular religious tradition or ritual for Becca, but rather the essence of “her divinity.”** For Becca, an elderly schoolteacher from the Midwest, God is clearly not a “man in the sky” but a more amorphous and

mysterious reality which might be best described as nature. She says “I feel God most vividly when I am close to nature. When I am sitting on the porch and hear the birds singing and see the flower and feel the wind that is God’s presence to me.” While Becca is confident that this natural force called “God” pervades the universe, she is also certain that God does not act on the universe as an independent or consciously calculating agent.

These four people represent data points on a continuum of God’s engagement in our lives and in the world. God is directly engaged in a personal way in the lives of Peggy and Chuck, through events and affairs for Peggy and through mental processes for Chuck. For Tom and Becca, God is not directly engaged in their lives in any personal way, although both Tom and Becca feel a presence of God, through community for Tom and through nature for Becca.

I am emphasizing a distinction between the experience of Peggy and Chuck from that of Tom and Becca because the experience of God’s engagement is a profound factor in our religious experience. The difference is so profound, I believe, that it is presently causing a bifurcation of the Unity movement that will likely split the movement over time.

I’ll elaborate on that in a moment, but let me first reveal the source of these four people. Peggy, Tom and Becca are from a 2006 study and book *America’s Four Gods: What We Say About God—& What That Says About Us* (pp. 21-24). **The book actually profiled a fourth person, Fernando, who’s testimony so closely matched that of Charles Fillmore that I decided to insert Charles Fillmore’s testimony as Chuck.** You can read Charles Fillmore’s testimony in [The Household of Faith, page 172](#). **Here is more of what Charles Fillmore is quoted as saying regarding God’s engagement:**

“I can remember with what satisfaction I used to imbibe the assumed wisdom of freshmen teachers. I knew nothing about God because I had never made an effort to get acquainted with Him and in my egotism, I said, ‘All these people that think they are in communion with God are deluded; I have never seen God. I believe in things you can see and I will take the testimony of Bob Ingersoll, who says you cannot know God, rather than that of Henry Ward Beecher, who says you can.’

“But a time came when I decided to solve this question independent of any man’s opinion. I set about to search for Him with my mind. And right here, I want to add my testimony good and strong with those who have said I know God. I talk and think to God, and He flashes His ideas into my mind. I am not deluded. I know His thoughts from the thoughts of men as they pass through the mental atmosphere. He also talks to me in certain dreams. I can distinguish these dreams from the other dreams. Repeated thinking about the presence of

God makes Him increasingly plainer to my inner vision. I have thought about Him as the life of my body until every cell is athrill with an energy that I can feel as you feel the shock of an electric battery, and He tells me how to communicate this life to others who have not recognized it as I have. **Don't let the fool say in your heart, 'There is no God' (Psalms 14:1). I let that kind of fool talk in my heart and it set up a current of thought that kept me for years speechless in the presence of God."**

I encourage you to click through to the Wikipedia links on [Bob Ingersoll](#) and [Henry Ward Beecher](#) because they give an interesting insight to who influenced the thinking of Charles Fillmore. We don't have many references like these and the stories of Ingersoll and the younger Beecher help us understand how Charles Fillmore's beliefs were shaped.

America's Four Gods: What We Say About God— & What That Says About Us

"systematically explores how Americans view God. The authors **argue that many of America's most intractable social and political divisions arise from religious convictions that are deeply held but rarely discussed.** Working with original survey data from thousands of Americans and a wealth of in-depth interviews, the authors trace America's cultural diversity to its ultimate source—differing beliefs about God. **They show that regardless of religious tradition (or lack thereof), Americans worship four distinct deities: the Authoritative God**, who is both engaged and judgmental; the **Benevolent God**, who loves and aids us in spite of our failings, the **Critical God**, who catalogs our sins but does not punish them (at least in this life); and the **Distant God**, who stands apart from the world." (From the inside cover).

People who hold these conceptions of God are evenly split, about 25% of the American population fall into each of the four categories. **My sense is that most people in Unity and New Thought will reject the notion that God is judgmental, which is an underpinning characteristic of the Authoritarian God and the Critical God. This implies that Unity's potential reach is about half of the American public, evenly divided between a belief in the Benevolent God and the Distant God.**

(Note to readers: You can take the survey online at:

<http://www.thearda.com/whoisyourgod/thegodtest/>. It's a short test that will take only 2-3 minutes. Know that the website is slightly broken; the 2nd and 3rd page should ask "Please select the response that best describes GOD for each question.")

(Academic note: the four profiles given here (Peggy, Chuck, Tom and Becca) are not just categories; they are *ranked* categories. This makes them particularly useful for social scientists who wish to survey church congregants and then measure correlations to other data.)

(Personal note: I first read this book in November 2015 and then shared it with my two daughters—a data scientist now at John Hopkins and a psychologist now at Albany Medical Center. They then gave their dad as a Christmas present the original survey dataset fully loaded in an open source data analysis tool so I could play with the survey questions and answers. Thank you, Stephanie and Vanessa).

As I said, my bet is that Unity and New Thought people will fall evenly split between experiencing God as Benevolent and experiencing God as Distant. Why is that so?

Think about Peggy. Peggy's testimony sounds very much like someone with a strong affinity for Unity's traditional prosperity teachings, which is a well-established Unity and New Thought teaching. For Chuck (Charles), we should be able to perceive an affinity for God engaging us in our mental process, which I would argue is a foundational teaching of Unity and New Thought. **Peggy's and Chuck's profiles are examples of those who experience God as highly engaged, in a personal way, in individual human life. For them, God is "Father" or "Father-Mother" God. A God who is not judgmental, but who is personally engaged in human life is Benevolent.**

For Tom, God's engagement is indirect, through our experience of community, or as it might be described in Fillmore terms, through race consciousness. God, as a "cosmic force" is most definitely not personal and there is no way Tom would acknowledge God being anything other than Principle. God as Principle is certainly part of the Unity and New Thought teaching. Becca is a true Transcendentalist, an honorable source of Unity spirituality, who experiences divinity pervading all nature and humanity. My sense is that Becca would not be comfortable talking about God as a transcendent being at all. Rather, she would refer primarily to "my divinity," her source of power and strength. **Tom's and Becca's profiles are examples of those who experience God as not engaged in any personal way in human life. For them God is Principle and "divinity." A God who is not judgmental but who is also not personally engaged in human life is Distant.**

I am well aware of the many comments and objections that are likely to arise from this post. There are plenty of references in Unity literature to lend support for everyone's point of view. Settling a theological point of view is not my point and, in my opinion, the last thing we need to be doing right now. **What we should be concerned about is what the authors of *America's Four Gods* have to say about understanding others:**

"While ignorance can indeed be blissful, there are important reasons for knowing what others think about God, even if it is sometimes uncomfortable or off-putting. The United States is a land of religious pluralism, populated by countless denominations and generously sprinkled with non-Christian minorities, not to mention nonbelievers. But Americans are losing sight of what

it means to live in a diverse society. In their book *The Big Sort*, [the authors] show that we have segregated ourselves into enclaves of people who look like us, talk like us, and behave like us. The downside of this growing pattern of self-segregation is that we tend not to meet or interact with many people who appear different from ourselves.”

If that assessment by the authors of *America's Four Gods* is true—that we as a society have "segregated ourselves into enclaves"—then we ought to consider that Unity is most likely evenly split four ways over the perception of how God is engaged in our life.

So this diversity of one's experience of God is at least a potential source of conflict and disunity in Unity. But it could be much more—a source of not only conflict but also of long-term bifurcation of the Unity movement. Here is why I believe that may be so.

The survey used by the researchers measured for many things besides a person's perception of God. It also measured demographic data such as age, gender, income, race and political views and it also measured religious data such as denominational affiliation and church attendance. Their findings found that perceptions of God's engagement in one's life is very much related to the demographic and religious data.

One statistic indicates that people who are atheist or who are not affiliated with a denomination (the “nones”) are much more likely to perceive God as not engaged in their personal life (the Distant God). Not surprising is that another statistic indicates that people who are “churched” (Catholics, mainline Protestant, Evangelicals and Black Protestants) are much more likely to perceive God as being personally engaged in their personal life.

***It's my perception* that we have found ourselves “segregated into an enclave” of the “spiritual but not religious” and that much of our teachings are now of a non-theist nature.** Evidence of that is Unity's embrace of Bishop John Spong and his advocacy of non-theistic religion, the persistent disparaging in Unity of “embedded theology” and the campaign by some to establish an orthodoxy of language in Unity. That is conjecture on my part. Each of us will need to form our own opinion.

***It's my perception* that we are marketing to believers in the Distant God. And we are marketing against the 2.19 billion Christians who hold to a sense of God as being personally engaged in their life.** One piece of evidence I see of that is the cavalier phrase we often see in Unity messaging “Culturally Christian, Spiritually Unlimited.”

***It's my perception* that, over time, the Fillmore ideas of a God who is personally engaged in our lives through prayer, healing and prosperity will find their way into**

mainline and Evangelical churches, establishing a new era of Metaphysical Christianity. I believe this is evident right now in the phenomenon we know as Oprah and Joel. **As for the future of the ideas of a Distant God, we will have to wait to see.**

Mark

Sunday, August 25, 2019



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