

God the Magician?
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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
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I am still in shock – I think we all are – from the events of the last few days, the horrific killings in the Middle East – Istanbul, Baghdad, three cities in Saudi Arabia – then two police killings of Black civilians caught on videotape and then the sniper assassination in Dallas of five police officers who were simply keeping order at an otherwise peaceful demonstration. In times like this, some ministers will lay aside their planned topic and concentrate on the latest events. My usual course is to try to integrate the recent events into what I was going to say anyway, and I'll follow that here.

My attention was drawn last month to the statement by Pope Francis which I just read, in which he gave a ringing endorsement to two pillars of the modern scientific viewpoint – the Big Bang and the theory of evolution – and asserted that God was not some kind of magician who brought all this into being with a wave of his magic wand. Though it turns out on closer inquiry that the Pope's speech is almost two years old, I missed it when it came out and it seems to me to be a very significant repositioning of the world's largest Christian denomination towards what we might call religious naturalism.

I want to illustrate the importance of this with the old story of the atheist and the Loch Ness monster. Most of you have heard me tell it, but I think it bears repeating. The atheist is fishing alone in a small boat in Loch Ness when there is suddenly a roiling of the water, and right next to his boat, the Loch Ness Monster rears his huge head. The atheist starts rowing away as fast as he can, but the monster pursues him and chomps away the back third of the boat in one bite. This propels the poor atheist into the sky where he yells, "God, help me!" Then the scene freezes and a voice comes from the clouds, "what did you say? I thought you didn't believe in me?" The atheist replies, "give me a break, until ten seconds ago I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster?" God says, "what do you want me to do?" The atheist says, "can't you just make the monster disappear?" God says, "No, that's what people like you don't understand. I don't do magic, I can just change people's hearts." So the atheist thinks and says, "well make the monster a Christian, then." So the scene unfreezes and the atheist starts back down into the waiting jaws of the monster who gets a beautiful peaceful smile on his face, folds his claws heavenwards and says, "for what I am about to receive, may I be truly thankful."

It's a nice distinction: God works through changing hearts and minds, not by hocus-pocus. The actual history of magic and religion is not quite so clear.

In pagan religions, everything was spirit – the trees, the mountains, the sky had spirits. The spiritually adept, the shamans, manipulated the spirits as best they could to get favorable results for agriculture or warfare or whatever they might be seeking. They did this through ritual and sacrifice. This was magic and it was religion.

Anthropologists and theologians often say that in such a system, divinity is immanent, it is present in everyday things in nature. In the monotheistic religions, by contrast, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God is said to be transcendent. That is, God lives somewhere but not everywhere. He may live in the Ark that the Israelites took through the Sinai desert, or in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Bible, as one of the great scriptures of monotheism, has as one of its themes driving out older paganisms with their human sacrifice, and their magicians. Pagans were the enemies of the true God. The Jews were constantly being called out by their prophets for turning away from God and worshiping the false idols of their neighbors.

With the development of monotheism, magic split off from religion. Within the Hebrew scriptural tradition, God performs miracles such as making the sun stand still, parting the Red Sea, turning a staff into a serpent. In the Christian tradition, Jesus is depicted driving out demons, healing the sick, walking on water, turning water into wine.

These miracles naturally raise the question whether either Jesus, in the New Testament or God, in the Hebrew Bible, is practicing magic. In the New Testament, after Jesus has cast out demons, the Jewish scribes accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul (Mark 3:22, Matthew 12:24, Luke 11:15). Jesus answers that it is not logical to cast out Satan with the power of Satan, and continues “if a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand.” Jesus insisted he was not practicing magic, though some early commentators were not sure. As it has come down to us, supernatural acts caused by God or Jesus or someone acting with their power are called miracles and are distinct from the tradition of magic, which is disparaged. Indeed, the Book of Exodus says plainly that a female sorceress or witch shall not be allowed to live (Ex. 22:18) a line which caused several alleged witches in Salem to hang in the seventeenth century. All this is a far cry from the magic you will see in this sanctuary on Wednesday nights. As I was thinking about this sermon, I stopped in after Rich Archer’s show and had a chat with this amiable magician. What is happening in a contemporary magic show is not manipulation of the spirit world but simply a willful suspension of disbelief for an hour. We enjoy the illusion that the handkerchiefs can disappear into the hat, that the rabbit can be found in it when it was empty a minute before, that the assistant can be sawed in half and still make it out of the box unharmed. Perhaps the very young believe that the ball really does appear in Rich’s ear, but most of us are there to be amused by his skill at directing our attention away from where the trick is happening.

This is how the modern minds view a magic show: it is prestidigitation, sleight of hand, a playing with our vision, nothing more. It does not challenge our view of reality; we know there is a trick there, if we were clever enough to see it. Most of us do not inhabit a mental world where there is a spirit resident in every tree and flower. We are the product of the Enlightenment. Science has disenchanted the world. We don't believe in superstition. We aren't afraid to have a black cat cross our path. We don't keep a lucky charm or St. Christopher medal around our necks. Now the father of modern science was probably Sir Isaac Newton, and he is remembered for giving us laws of acceleration and motion which describe reality in mathematical equations. He and his fellow scientists bequeath to us a world view where the sun gets up not because God caused it to but because the earth rotates on its axis on a regular schedule. Yet Newton, this apotheosis of rationality, spent a fair amount of his scientific time trying to turn base metals into gold. That's right he was into alchemy. Back only four centuries ago, the distinction between science and what we would now call pseudoscience, between chemistry and alchemy, astrology and astronomy, magic and engineering was not all that clear.

The Unitarian side of our religious heritage grew out of Enlightenment values. The earliest generation held that the laws of nature generally applied but the miracles recounted in the Bible were proof of the power of God and Jesus. Emerson rejected this thinking. In his Divinity School Address of 1838, God was not supernatural, God was identical with the laws of nature, though these also included moral laws. Jesus was God incarnate, but so were and are the rest of us when we think as he thought. But Jesus' great insight got debased and corrupted in the generation following his death, so that Christian orthodoxy said he was Jehovah come down from heaven, and anyone who claims he was a mere man should be killed.

As far as miracles, Emerson strongly believed that the true miracles were not those which violated the laws of nature, but the grandeur of the everyday world presented to our senses.

"[Jesus] spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain." Emerson Divinity School Address

The blowing clover and falling rain are miracles, Emerson said, not the turning of water into wine or walking on water.

I have brought us this far in our own Enlightenment tradition to provide some context for the remarks of Pope Francis that God is not a magician. God may be the source of the laws of nature, but it is not his business to violate them by making the sun stand still or raining fire down on Sodom and Gomorrah.

Pope Francis says that contrary to what you read in Genesis, God did not create the world with the wave of a wand. Instead, He “created human beings and let them develop according to the internal laws that he gave to each one so they would reach their fulfillment.”

Well, this leaves a lot more questions unanswered than answered. The book of Genesis has two stories of creation of the world, one is the seven-day affair and the other is the story of the Garden of Eden. They are not consistent with one another. In the seven-day version, God doesn’t wave a magic wand, he is even more passive than that: he speaks the world into existence. He describes what he wants and somehow it springs forth just as he ordered it. Maybe there was some kind of construction company offstage. At any rate, he pauses after each day’s labors and inspects the results and pronounces it good.

There is no hint of evil or the possibility of evil in the first creation story. The second story, though, focuses almost entirely on evil, and the knowledge of good and evil, which is the fruit that Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat. When Pope Francis says that God created humans with internal laws so that they would reach their fulfillment, he is basically channeling Augustine who, as I noted last week, gets God off the hook for the evil in the world by saying God made humans with free will.

But if Pope Francis is agreeing that evolution is true, he has to back off of Genesis. Humans may have ended up with free will, but humans are an awfully long way down the chain of evolution. At what point did we get free will? Was it as a one-cell organism, or the first proto-fish in the sea, as the early mammals or the early hominins?

It’s all very well to say the theory of evolution is basically true, and it’s better for the Catholic Church to agree to that than to try to fight it – Pope Benedict flirted with creationism. But evolution is a process with no overall goal and no end-point. Each stage is built on the last. What does that do to the idea of a God who knows all truth, past, present and future? There is no knowing the future of evolution because the system is too complex.

We might have thought that the spate of Black Lives Matter protests over the past four years, drawing the nation’s attention to the problem of black citizens disproportionately subject to stops and fatal encounters with the police would have caused some police departments to take notice and the incidence would be going down. But we had a depressingly familiar couple of incidents just a few days ago.

Philando Castile of St. Paul, Minnesota was a 32-year-old cafeteria supervisor. In the past few years, he had been pulled over 52 times for one minor infraction or another. He had been assessed more than \$6,000 in fines, many for charges that

were later dismissed. A study of racial profiling in the Twin Cities area in 2002 found that overall, officers stopped minority drivers at greater rates than whites and searched them at greater rates, but found contraband in those searches at lower rates than whites.

Castile apparently had a permit to carry a gun, which he informed the officer about as he reached for his ID. It's unclear whether he actually had a gun. Apparently the cop thought he was going for the gun and fired. Castile's girlfriend narrates a video after the fact telling the officer that Castile was just going for his ID when the officer shot him. One doesn't know what else Castile could have done. Many liberals are calling for the NRA to get involved, for after all, what good are permits to carry a gun if a cop can shoot you for having one? Or are permits only for white people?

The Castile case had followed by less than a day a the killing of Alton Sterling in Louisiana, who was selling CDs outside a grocery store. But then events took an unexpected turn. Protests about these two deaths were held in many cities, including Dallas. The Dallas protest was peaceful until just before its scheduled end, when a sniper opened fire on police, killing five officers and wounding others. Police were able to corner the shooter in a parking garage, and after a long standoff, when it became clear he would continue shooting any police he could, the police decided to send in a robot with a bomb which killed the suspect. And the protests continued last night in major cities across the nation, peaceful except for the one in Minneapolis, where some demonstrators threw bottles at police.

If God were a magician, could He wave a magic wand and make this all go away? Could he undo the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow and segregation and make us all see each other as His children, regardless of skin color? Could He make it safe to be black in this country?

My thirty-something niece lives in Atlanta and posted a message on Facebook a couple of days ago which said she didn't recognize the country in which she had grown up. But I think it's the same country, it's just more "woke." We in the white part of America are waking up to the pervasive reality of racism which our black fellow-citizens have had to deal with all their lives. The protests have made it impossible to ignore.

There has been magic going on, but it is no more a manipulation of supernatural forces than what goes on here on Wednesday night. It is a sleight of hand. It is white people convincing themselves they live in a country which is fair and just while the lived experience of people of color is completely different. We are constantly distracting our attention from truths we don't want to face. One of those truths is that we are a nation armed to the teeth. Most countries don't have the problem of police shooting civilians because in most countries, the

police force is not armed. It's armed in America because the citizens are armed in America.

Another truth is that we are all the same under the skin. We can grieve the loss of five officers in Dallas at the same time we grieve the black victims of police violence. Human lives have been lost.

It looks like a different country but it is a country which is waking up. Waking up is painful, folks.

There are beacons of hope. David Brown, the chief of police in Dallas, was the human face of the tragedy there, a black man who has been through painful losses in his own personal life. He took over the reins of the Dallas police department with a mission to transform the culture. In 2009, there were 147 reports of excessive force against the Dallas police. Last year there were 13. He did this in part by firing more than 70 officers.

Here in Barnstable County, the Human Rights Commission is working with police chiefs to put together a community dialog to try to minimize the chances of something like this happening here. We are trying to be proactive rather than reactive.

If God really were a magician, maybe we wouldn't have such problems. Coins would appear in ears, rabbits would be pulled out of hats, the pretty assistant would emerge from being sawed in half without a scratch. And everybody would be treating everybody as brothers and sisters. That would be a clever illusion. But illusions are the problem. We live in illusions. If there is a God, I think He or She is trying to get us to wake up, to see the lives that our brothers and sisters have to lead, and to bend that arc of the universe towards justice. Amen.

Reading July 10

NPR Pope Says God Not 'A Magician, With A Magic Wand'

October 28, 2014

SCOTT NEUMAN

In a move that could be aimed at healing a rift between science and religion, Pope Francis has said that evolution and the Big Bang are consistent with the notion of a creator. And according to the pontiff, believers should not view God as "a magician, with a magic wand."

Francis made the remarks at an assembly of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, billed as meeting to discuss "Evolving Concepts of Nature."

"When we read about Creation in Genesis, we run the risk of imagining God was a magician, with a magic wand able to do everything. But that is not so," Francis told the gathering, where he also dedicated a statue of his predecessor, Benedict XVI. God, Francis said, "created human beings and let them develop according to the internal laws that he gave to each one so they would reach their fulfillment."

To be sure, the Catholic Church's views on the origins of the universe and life, unlike those of many Protestant sects, have for years been largely in line with the scientific consensus. The church has long leaned toward what some describe as "theistic evolution," i.e., a God supernaturally created the universe and life but allowed natural processes to work over billions of years.