

NUUs Letter

Volume 23, No. 3 - September 2020

Northwoods Unitarian Universalist
Fellowship
8625 Peggy's Lane, P.O. Box 1881,
Woodruff, WI 54568



www.nuuf.com

We are a Welcoming Congregation

A virtual chalice lighting:

In This Time of Uncertainty

Courtesy of the WorshipWeb Library.

For more information, contact
worshipweb@uua.org.

by [Amy Williams Clark](#)

We gather in this time of uncertainty, full of unknowns, as angst closes in upon us.

We light this chalice with a flame that draws us together.

With this flame, we cut through the dankness of isolation and are warmed by the fires of our interconnection.

For this moment, this radical moment, we find a certainty within the knowable bonds of love and community.

UPCOMING SERVICES

Sept. 13, Richard Olson

Sept. 27, Jennifer LaPorte



Sunday Discussions: 11:00 a.m. via Zoom — Watch for invitations in emails

Sept. 6 – read a favorite poem (or part if it is too long) and describe why you like it so much

Sept. 13 – personal reflections on service by Richard Olson

Sept. 20 – courage—what does it mean to you, a time you have shown courage

Sept. 27 – personal reflections on service by Chaplain Jennifer LaPorte

If you need help accessing a Zoom meeting contact Dick Fields, 715-385-2975.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

For distribution of announcements between newsletters or email/address corrections, contact Candy Sorensen at sorencan@yahoo.com

MILESTONES

Cara Hettich	09-01
Sherry Zoars	09-01
Jonathon Beutler	09-01
Carly Ratliff	09-05
Jerry Collins	09-05
Ruth Erbs	09-07
Rev. Sydney Morris	09-07
Briana Kubinek	09-08
MacKenzie Reupert	09-08
Mollie West	09-10
Sharon Reilly	09-11
Cathy & Dion Peterson	09-13
Erick Boustead	09-16
Patricia Stanley	09-15
John Kuczkowski & Mary Alice Forester	09-17
Don Roberts	09-27
Betsy Schussler & Rick Foral	09-30

Do you see a mistake that can be corrected? If so, please contact Candy Sorensen at (715) 892-2997 or sorencan@yahoo.com Thanks!

HIGHLIGHTS

This new initiative will highlight two NUUF members a month. Hopefully we can all learn a bit about one another and stay connected during the pandemic. Members will be contacted and asked to write a brief autobiography. Enjoy the first two profiles written by Dick and Mary Ann Fields.

Terry Hoyt, Membership Committee chair

My name is Terry Hoyt. I am a founding member of the Fellowship. I grew up in Joliet, Illinois where I attended the Universalist Church. My mother was the church organist (a huge pipe organ) and my aunt was on the Board. I left Joliet when I went away to college at the University of Illinois in Champaign/Urbana. After college I got married and moved to LaGrange, Ill., with my wife Barbara and our son Spenser. I taught grade school for a year in Chicago. In 1958 we moved to Madison, Wis. where I managed bands until I entered law school in 1969. When I graduated we moved to Lac du Flambeau where I worked as a criminal defense attorney for Wisconsin Indian Legal Services. My wife didn't care for the isolation of the Northwoods so we separated amicably. I met my second wife when she returned to the reservation with her three children. We combined our families in 1975 and lived happily together. Our daughter Karen was the first wedding at the Fellowship with the wedding ceremony officiated by my son Spenser. My wife and I raised our two granddaughters and they attended the Fellowship. Kim is a member now and Kayla teaches Spanish in Sacramento, California. My wife Corrine "Terri" passed away in 2013. So there, now you know a little bit more about me.

Kate Rahimzadeh, NUUF treasurer

Kate Rahimzadeh is the daughter of former president, Bob Hanson. Kate grew up in Rhinelander and loved the northwoods. Kate earned a bachelors degree from UW-Eau Claire and then returned to school to earn an additional bachelors degree in nursing from UW-Oshkosh. In what has become a repeated conversation at the holiday dinner table when visiting her mom it is said that when pushed to get a masters degree in social work instead of a second bachelors, Kate announced, "I don't want a masters, I want a license that proves I can do something when I graduate."

Kate moved to Miami Beach, Florida to "do something" after graduation and worked long hours at Mount Sinai Hospital during the AIDS crisis of the mid nineties. In the late nineties Kate moved to Atlanta for what she intended to be two years to work in electrophysiology research at Emory University. Fourteen years later she resigned from Emory's School of Medicine after work in cardiology, neurology, and neurosurgery to grow and eventually sell a software technology company focused on tools for healthcare fraud investigation with her now ex-husband. While married she raised three stepchildren, attended school functions, and found time for whitewater kayaking, Tai Chi, and some travel. Since the sale of the business tying her to Atlanta coincided with divorce, Kate chose to move back to the Midwest and settled in Saint Paul for a few years

but also bought a cabin on Big Arbor Vitae lake. Bob and Cheryl Hanson collaborated on remodeling plans and design choices and Frank Patin and Ann Sorensen did the renovations. When the work was complete Kate hardly ever returned to the cities. She is now a full time resident of Arbor Vitae and upgraded to a home on Little Arbor Vitae lake after sale of the Saint Paul house and beautiful Big Arb cabin. She keeps busy with landscaping, pontooning, bicycling, playing musical instruments, throwing the ball for her dogs, and being the NUUF treasurer.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- The **Sunday Morning Discussion Group**, co-chaired by Mary Beth O'Halloran and Mary Ann Fields, meets every Sunday morning, by Zoom, at 11:00 A.M. The Sunday we have a virtual service, the topic will be a discussion on the sermon and the alternate Sunday will be a topic to be determined. All are welcome to attend the Zoom meeting.
Candy will send an invitation to the Fellowship to attend the Zoom meeting.
- Frederick Place in Rhinelander has a sizeable number of dates open for meals. If you can help out with one of these dates you can either call Frederick Place at 715-369-9777 or email Tammy Modic at tammymodic.frederickplace@gmail.com
- **The Spirituality Committee** —Since July, our goal has been to produce Sunday services in both audio and video format. These will not be live streamed Zoom services; they will be placed on YouTube and will continue to be on our website as before and available any time after they are posted.
We hope you are enjoying the services we have been providing and if you have any comments or suggestions please let Dick Fields, or any other committee members, know.
- A few updates from **UU the Vote WI** and invitation to share with your congregation to join some of our work over the next 60 days leading up to election day.
Writing with a few requests and opportunities to get involved:
 - Phonebanking: I'm looking for people to join our upcoming National phonebanks targeting voters in Wisconsin - the phonebanks will be for UUs across the U.S. on Wednesdays 6-8pm: Sept. 2 and 30, Oct. 7 and 21, and Nov 3. Folks can register at <https://www.uuthevote.org/phone-banking/>.
 - UU the Vote work: If folks in the congregation want to get more involved in some of our work – reaching out to UUs across the state, phonebanking etc. Please fill out this card to sign up for more info: <https://bit.ly/wicommit>.

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- Let me know any questions you may have about this ongoing work or if there are specific ways I can support what you're moving. Thanks so much for your leadership and moving things – even amid all the shifts and challenges
 -
 - **The Social Justice Committee** will have a Zoom meeting on Sept. 15 at 7 p.m. Anyone can attend.
 - **Building Your Own Theology**
The Care Committee will again sponsor Building Your Own Theology this fall/winter. It will meet via zoom, normally on first and third Tuesdays at 10am. Toni Polfus, Jana Mirs and Mary Beth O'Halloran are in the planning stages, around the complications of COVID-19. We have tentatively set the start date for the 5th Tuesday in September (9/29). We are considering several books but think the voting process we used last year would be too complicated online. Watch for more information, book(s), and schedule in September, but put 1st and 3rd Tuesdays on your calendar for the rest of the fall/winter...yippee!
 - We have a stock of **Fair Trade coffee and chocolate** for the NUUF community. If you are interested, please contact me about what we have available and how to make a safe transfer of these goodies. The Fair Trade farmers will benefit, as well as your taste buds! David Barnhill david.barnhill.925@gmail.com.
 - **Women's Group:** Fourth Tuesday, 10:00 am via zoom – watch for email invitation. Sept 22. – Transitions – what were easy or difficult transitions in your life—how did you get through
 - **The Northwoods Community Garden** is now officially happening in Rhinelander! Mike Haasl and a team have created a board and secured permission from Nicolet College to use a spot in their field for a garden. The current community garden in Rhinelander grows food for the food pantry. This one will be for community members to rent plots and grow their own food. Teaching, art, permaculture, Earth Day and community events will be tied into the garden and we hope it will become a hub for sustainability in the region. We are trying to build the garden this fall and are applying for grants and donations. If anyone would like to donate funds, labor or organizational time to the project, please contact Mike Haasl.
 - **Food for Kids** is looking for donations for their tentative Octg. 24 packaging event at the Lakeland Union High School. Local Food pantries will be supplied with some of these meals depending on fundraising efforts. This has been a very important community effort for several years and our Fellowship started it.

Laura Bertch of the B.J. Lions Club, P.O. Box 61, Boulder Junction, WI 54512 Laura is the chairperson for this event and telephone no. is 715-892-1204

- **Caritas-Minocqua** is a charitable organization established by local churches and civic groups in the Lakeland area. We assist people with paying small bills in emergency situations. We are closed for all face-to-face sessions with clients; however, we are now conducting interviews by telephone on Thursday mornings from 9-noon.

You must first leave a message on our voicemail at 715-356-9989. Your message should contain the following information. Please speak clearly and slowly. We need

your first and last name, your phone number, whether you are a new client or a returning client, and a very brief statement of your urgent need or how we can help you. Please be patient and we will call you to arrange an interview. Stay safe.

If you can be an empathic listener and want to make a difference in our community and the lives of our residents, this may be the volunteer opportunity for you! If interested, please contact our director, Beth Jacobson at bjgraphic2@gmail.com.

- Jennifer LaPorte, St. Kate Hospice Chaplain, has presented services at our Fellowship in the past and is scheduled again on Sept. 27, 2020. She informed us that she is “available for pastoral care/meeting with any folks who may be in need of a chaplain during this time.” To set up a meeting with her call 715-240-0120.
- **The Membership Committee** that oversees communications is making the following request of committee chairs. We would ask that you be responsible for sending communications directly to your committee members rather than sending them through Candy. We would also like to ask you to submit any committee news to our NUUSLetter editor, Carly Ratliff carly.j.ratliff@gmail.com. When submitting things to the NUUSLetter please use a font that is easier to read. And we would also like you to send notice of your meetings so they can be placed on the NUUF.COM calendar. These should go to Jason Hoff ic_boy@yahoo.com. If you have any questions, please call me at 715-614-0088. Thanks for your help in improving communication.

- **FROM UUA, regarding Jacob Blake:**

(original message was sent before the shooting of protestors on Aug. 25)

On Sunday evening, Aug. 23, police officers in Kenosha, WI, shot Jacob Blake seven times in the back as he was entering his vehicle. Inside the car, his three children [watched](#) their father as he was shot. As I write this message, Mr. Blake remains in critical condition, fighting for his life.

Jacob Blake. Jacob Blake. Jacob Blake.

We speak your name aloud in this liminal time, holding you in prayer and love.

We surround you--a great cloud of witnesses, living and dead--holding you tenderly and sending you energy and strength as your sacred body struggles to live and to heal.

We pray for your sweet babies, who will never unsee what they saw on Sunday.

We keep vigil with all who know and love you, buoying them with hope and courage.

Jacob Blake: Your life matters. Your body matters. Your spirit matters.

We are with you.

Accompanying all of our particular, laser-focused prayers toward Mr. Blake, there is also a nauseating déjà vu to everything we're watching out of Wisconsin this week. Too many times, we've witnessed the police's blatant disregard for the lives and humanity of Black people. Too many times, we've had to take to the streets, to bail out our comrades who get arrested, to counteract media messages and police spin trying to make victims into criminals. Too many times, we've had to ask how we can take action, demand accountability, prevent another "next time."

At our UU the Vote staff meeting yesterday, we grappled together with how to respond to this latest act of police violence against Black people. As we talked about what message to send out as a response, and whether to shift our planned calendar of events, we arrived back with clarity at some of the fundamental commitments we have held since the beginning of this campaign:

The people we elect, and the policies they are able to enact, matter deeply. When terrible acts of violence like the shooting of Jacob Blake occur, it matters deeply who the mayor and the district attorney and the judges are, which statutes and laws are in place, and more. When we organize to #VoteLove and #DefeatHate, we can reduce harm in the present while working in a thousand other ways to build a world in which all people are safe and free - where peoples' lives and livelihoods always come first because as Rev. Erik David Carlson of Bradford Community UU, Kenosha's UU congregation, reminded us in the congregation's [statement](#) "...we

affirm that we would rather lose 100 buildings than one more life to police violence.”

And, it also matters deeply that our electoral organizing be inextricably linked to other movement strategies. Protesting, direct action, cultural organizing, healing justice, art making, community organizing--all of these responses are critical to building and leveraging power, holding our elected officials accountable, pushing forward a liberatory agenda, and sustaining our spirits even in the midst of heartbreak and grief. So it matters that we also continue to show up, with our bodies and our resources and our networks, for long-term organizing led by frontline movements.

So, beloveds, please know that we at UU the Vote are with you in the tension, and we are committed to moving forward in the both/and that is required of us in this moment:

For those of you who are grieving and broken right now--especially to our Black siblings and kin--we pray for you to have space for rest and healing and grief. May you find gentleness and support, and room to breathe and rage and mourn.

For those of you who are outraged, or activated, or desperate to find a way to be of use right now, we pray for you to channel that energy into organizing. Show up in the streets with your own local Black-led organizing collective, and donate to the [Milwaukee Freedom Fund](#) supporting bail, ticketing & legal support for organizers in Kenosha. Watch this [conversation](#) organized by Freedom, Inc. featuring WI-based Black and Hmong organizers, talking about violence and safety in the wake of Jacob Blake's shooting. Demand that your city defund the police, and [work to enact the BREATHE Act](#). Stay tuned as further demands and opportunities to support emerge from Southeastern Wisconsin.

Let's keep showing up, together, for ourselves, each other and our collective futures.

In faith and solidarity,

Rev. Ashley Horan

UUA Organizing Strategy Director

Our NUUF Community

If you know someone who is interested in joining the *Northwoods Unitarian Universalist Fellowship*, Terry Hoyt at thoyt@newnorth.net or call 715-3563908,

Check out our website <http://nuuf.com>. Also take time to "LIKE" us on Facebook. Click here on [Northwoods Unitarian Universalist Fellowship](#) for direct access if you already have a Facebook account. We're posting pics, reminders about events and more.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Newsletter

Hello everyone, I will be compiling the newsletter for the foreseeable future! Please send announcements and updates to me, Carly Ratliff, at carly.j.ratliff@gmail.com or to Candy Sorensen at sorencan@yahoo.com by Aug. 28 for the September newsletter. It is very helpful if your copy is written exactly the way you want it to read so that it can be copied and pasted. Thank you!

PRESIDENT'S NOTE

From Mary Ann Fields:

This has certainly been a different summer for us.

I'm very happy to know that several committees have met this summer by Zoom. This is a good sign that we are still connected.

Dick hopes that you are enjoying our Sunday services on our nuuf.com website. We are having discussions by Zoom every Sunday at 11:00 A.M. Sundays that we have a service the discussion will center around the mornings service. On the off Sundays you will be notified by email what the topic will be. Info on how to join our discussion group will be sent by Candy.

If you are in the neighborhood of our Fellowship building visit the Memorial Garden. The committee has done a super job with the walkway leading up to the Garden. The Garden area has been cleaned up and looks neat and ready for plantings and whatever else they have in mind.

Please feel free to email me dmafields@yahoo.com or call 715 385 2975.

As Ever Mary Ann

A virtual chalice extinguishing:

We Are One

Courtesy of the WorshipWeb Library.

For more information, contact worshipweb@uua.org.

by Amy Zucker Morganstern

Never has it been more true than now:
We extinguish this flame,
But the sparks within us remain alight.
From each of us, in our supposed solitude,
The signals buzz and hum, sparkling through space one to the other,
Connecting us invisibly
But palpably.
We are one.
And from every window,
Our light shines.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

The article, by Lloyd Geering, included below in this newsletter recently appeared in *The Fourth R*, a regular publication of the Westar Institute, and is reproduced here with their permission (*The Fourth R*, V. 33, No. 3, May-June 2020, pp 15-18). Sir Lloyd Geering is a Minister Emeritus of the Presbyterian Church, Emeritus Professor of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, where he established the Department of Religious Studies, and former Principal of Kings Theological College in Dunedin. A three-time Honoree of the New Zealand government, in 2009 he became a Knight Grand Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit. This easily readable essay would be a great topic for discussion at a future Zoom meeting.

—Submitted by Ed Stoeber.

The Life of God from Conception to Death in the Human Thought-World

Lloyd Geering

It was long commonly assumed that we live in two worlds, a physical world and a spiritual world that is inhabited chiefly by God, as is implied by “our Father who is in heaven.” It is true that we live in two worlds, but they are not the two that our forebears believed in. We today live in the physical universe and the domain of human minds. Our bodies live in the *physical world*, but our minds do their thinking in a *thought-world*. Indeed it is possible for us to be so deeply immersed in our thought-world that we become unaware of what is going on around us in the physical world, and we see and understand the physical world through the lens of our thought-world. This is why the same physical world is viewed or interpreted differently from person to person.

Our personal thought-world in turn both contributes to and draws from a community thought-world whenever we communicate our thoughts by means of language. The many existing community thought-worlds date from the advent of human language. As its own particular language evolved, every human language group slowly accumulated its own community thought-world and we commonly refer to this as its culture, though to be sure the two concepts are not identical. And while these community thought-worlds have much in common, each also has concepts and usages that are peculiar to it. For example, at both the centre and circumference of the thought-worlds of both Christians and Muslims is the idea of God.

To understand how this came about we must go back to the origin of our community thought-world and first observe the way in which the evolving ancient cultures came to understand the natural forces that they experienced.

Our knowledge of the thought-worlds of primitive humankind makes it clear that such phenomena as wind and breath, which could not be seen but only felt, remained unexplainable and hence full of mystery. Take for example our English word *spirit*, the name of a concept that remains difficult to define. It comes from the Latin *spiritus* which means “breath.” In many ancient languages the same word means “wind,” “breath,” or “spirit” depending on the context, and thus gives strong evidence of how our notion of spirit was born. The primitive human mind imagined itself surrounded by an invisible *spiritual* world of which wind and breath were the tangible evidence.

The Birth of the Gods

In the next stage of cultural development the often unpredictable ways in which some objects and forces of the natural world seemed to operate led the ancients to believe they were controlled by personal wills rather like their own; accordingly they gave these forces personal names. Such a psychological mechanism is still to be seen at work in the minds of little children as they give personal names to their dolls, toys, and pets, treating them as if they possessed personal wills like those of their human owners. And much as modern weathercasters give personal names to hurricanes, so the ancients gave personal names to the heavenly bodies and the forces they observed in nature, all of which transcended their direct control. This is how the human thought-world came to conceive of gods.

When we moderns hear people speak of gods, we too readily jump to the conclusion that they represent the beginnings of religion. But it is somewhat anachronistic, and hence misleading, to use such modern terms as “religion” and “science” in discussing a cultural age in which they do not properly belong because they had not yet been coined.

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Since the word "science" etymologically means "knowledge," and the gods played the most important role in the knowledge that filled the thought-worlds of ancient people, it is clear that "the gods" were as much central concepts of primitive science as of primitive religion.

The gods were conceived by human imagination to identify and explain natural phenomena, and thus played much the same role in the ancient thought-worlds as do such scientific terms as electron, neutron, and quark in our modern thought-world. One crucial difference, however, is that since the forces attributed to those gods transcended human power and control, it was thought that our survival depended upon our offering them respect and obedience.

Each tribe or ethnic group had its own way of naming the gods and describing their distinctive portfolios, formulations that eventually covered every aspect of human experience: fertility, birth, death, war, peace, love, and so on. The cultural age of the gods lasted for a very long time and, in the more isolated areas of the globe, has survived until modern times. We ourselves live so close to the age of the gods that we still name the days of the week after them, acknowledging Teutonic divinities in Woden's Day and Thor's Day, and a Roman god in Saturn's Day—to say nothing of the even more obvious Sun's Day and Moon's Day.

The ancients explained natural phenomena through the medium of stories about the gods, which we now call myths. Etymologically, the word simply refers to something that is *told* and is nearly synonymous with *story*. The telling of stories was the ancient way of expressing knowledge and preceded for aeons what we know as philosophy and science. These stories explained the jurisdiction and competency of each god and described his/her behaviour. Drawing unconsciously upon their own personal behaviour, the ancients pictured gods who loved, fought, married, and produced offspring. They were usually conceived of as being immortal, though a few—such as those associated with the changing seasons—died and came back to life again. Collectively, these stories constituted the body of cultural knowledge that was transmitted from generation to generation and provided each human community with its identity.

In our oldest records of what humans thought, we find that not only were the gods already well defined and accepted, but that humans felt themselves to be at the mercy of these unseen powers. In other words the gods were already an integral part of the prehistoric human thought-worlds. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, Tiamat,

Marduk, and Kingu reigned supreme; in Greece Zeus, Apollo, and Aphrodite were worshipped; and in Rome Jupiter, Venus, and Juno held sway in people's imagination.

Although we have no way of knowing with certainty, it is likely that the gods were known by their proper names even before the generic word "god" was coined to refer to these imagined entities. As the ancients saw it, the gods belonged to a higher order of being than that of the lowly human beings, whom they therefore treated as slaves and often regarded with disdain.

Those ancient cultures may be labelled *polytheistic* in that they acknowledged many gods and often assigned them positions in a hierarchy. Then from this thought-world characterised by a great multiplicity of gods, there gradually evolved one that we now label *henotheistic*, in which each ethnic group paid exclusive allegiance to a single deity, but accepted the reality and local authority of other people's gods. This is well documented in the Hebrew Bible, for the Israelite prophets insisted that the people of Israel should worship only Yahweh, but never denied the reality of the gods of their neighbouring nations, like Chemosh the Moabite god and the Philistine Dagon.

The Birth of Monotheism

The transition from *polytheism* to *henotheism* occurred sometime between 1000 BCE and 400 BCE, during which time the ancient Israelite prophets urged their people to abandon all other gods except the one they called Yahweh. Originally this supreme deity was probably a storm god, but by the time of the biblical prophets he had become the tribal god of Israel. The message of the prophets became embedded in the legendary story of Moses, and took its particular form in the Second Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods but me."

The next transition, from *henotheism* to *monotheism*, began during the Babylonian Exile (567–540 BCE) and was completed by 400 BCE, as shown by the promulgation of the Torah (The Five Books of Moses), the foundational section of the Hebrew Bible

that constitutes the Christian Old Testament. The Torah asserted that everything in existence is to be traced back to the source that it called God. But because the Hebrew word for God (*elohim*) is plural in form and literally means "gods," it stands as a permanent reminder of the transition from "the many" to "the one."

Nothing could demonstrate more clearly than the opening chapter of Genesis that although the Jews went into exile as henotheists, they returned to their Holy Land

We ourselves live so close to the age of the gods that we still name the days of the week after them.

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as monotheists. This chapter, composed by Jewish priests exiled from their homeland, makes no mention of the name of the Jewish tribal God Yahweh, and it is here that the word “God” (*elohim*) assumed the status of a proper name—perhaps for the first time! Here too we find the earliest expression of the notion that God is the creative source of all that exists, and hence the ultimate explanation of everything and the key to the meaning of human existence. Thus it was that the idea of God evolved out of the notion of the gods.

The first chapter of Genesis marks the crossing of a very significant threshold in the evolution of human culture. The assertion that at the beginning of time it was God who created everything was such a powerful cultural invention that it remained wholly convincing until quite recent times. This event occurred during what today is commonly called the Axial Period, a term coined by the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who observed that somewhere around 500 BCE the evolution of human culture underwent a major change, a giant turn on its axis. In some five different places stretching from Greece to China but independently from each other, the old gods came to be questioned, modified, or abandoned because they were no longer the most convincing way of explaining the natural world. Karen Armstrong has written a clear and thorough description of this cultural change in her 2006 book *The Great Transformation*.

The Judeo-Christian cultural tradition is, of course, only one of those that were radically reshaped during the Axial Period, but it was the one that gave rise to monotheism. Indeed, this transition from the many gods to the One God may be referred to as “the conception of God,” for it was an event that took place in the evolving Jewish thought-world. It did not, of course, change the nature of reality itself, but marked a significant change in the way the Jewish people *conceived* of reality—that is how their thought-world interpreted the physical world. And this is how monotheism was born.

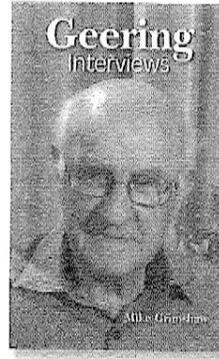
The Birth of the Trinity

Perhaps because it both unified and simplified the human thought-world, monotheism was generally quick to replace polytheism wherever it spread, and most notably gave rise to the three cultural traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which together spread round the globe and eventually influenced more than half of it. While Judaism remained linked to its ethnic origin, Christianity and Islam had little trouble in crossing ethnic boundaries, giving rise to Christendom and the Islamic world. Islam arose, in part, as a revival of pure monotheism after Christianity’s doctrine of the incarnation threatened its very essence by bridging the gulf between God and humankind.

The seeds of this doctrine appear in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel:

Geering Interviews

Mike Grimshaw



“In this fascinating collection, we travel with Lloyd Geering along a path into the church, then into modern theological thought, and then out to radical theology and postmodern philosophy. Grimshaw acts as the guide, but Geering is the Captain.”

—David Galston, Brock University

2018, 230 pages, pbk, \$20

E-book available

ISBN 978-1-59815-214-2

See order form on page 27



In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14)

The very idea that God could take human form in flesh and blood was more than Jews and Muslims could accept, and even Christians struggled with it for some centuries before finally resolving the issue by creating the doctrine of the Trinity, which conceives the Deity to be One God consisting of Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this doctrine the Father preserves the creativity and utter supremacy of the Godhead, the Son represents the significance of Jesus the Saviour, and the Holy Spirit acknowledges the spiritual dimension of humankind.

Doubts and Alternatives

The doctrine of the Trinity played a dominant role in the Christian thought-world for many centuries, but began to break down in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. In the sixteenth century there arose, first in Poland and then in Transylvania, a movement known as Unitarianism, which set out to restore the pure monotheism that Christians inherited from the Jews. In doing so, these reformers also recovered the complete humanity of Jesus, regarding him not as a man who embodied the divine being, but one whose teaching was inspired by God. Then in the seventeenth century the deists called into question not only the doctrine of the Trinity but the very idea of a personal deity who responded to human prayers, watched over world affairs, and occasionally intervened by performing miracles. Deists thought of God simply as the initial force that created the world and all its natural workings.

But whereas the deists restricted the activity of God to setting the vast universe in motion, pantheists went in the opposite direction and identified God with all natural processes from beginning to end, contending that one may speak of “God or Nature.” The great contrast between the deists and the pantheists made it clear that the coming of the modern global thought-world had so undermined the traditional theistic idea of God that the free-thinkers of the Enlightenment wanted to abandon the idea of God altogether.

But the idea of God was so deeply rooted in the thought-world of Western culture that to most people its truth seemed to be self-evident. That is why both scholars and lay-people alike completely rejected Ludwig Feuerbach when in his book *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) he sought to demonstrate that “God” was nothing more than the personification of our highest human values and its projection onto a mythical heavenly screen. Following hard on the heels of Feuerbach’s project, Charles Darwin produced his new theory of the evolution of all living creatures by the process of natural selection, thus rendering quite unnecessary even the God of the deists. These two thinkers did much to bring the age of monotheism to an end.

The Decline of God

Near the end of the nineteenth century the prophetic mind of Friedrich Nietzsche discerned what was happening in Western culture, and in the person of Zarathustra, announced, “God is dead and we humans have killed him.” Yet the idea of God was destined to suffer a slow death, for the Jewish intellectual Martin Buber preferred to speak of “the eclipse of God,” expecting the growing disappearance of God from the nineteenth-century thought-world to be only temporary, since in the minds of millions of traditional theists God remained very much alive.

It was not until a number of Christian theologians in the 1960s—among them Thomas Altizer, Paul van Buren, William Hamilton, and John Robinson—acknowledged the truth of Nietzsche’s announcement and declared that the concept of God had become so obsolete that it was no longer convincing to speak of “the living God” as a being who created and ruled over the universe. Even the popular magazine *Time* featured this idea on the cover of its April 1966 issue by asking, “Is God Dead?” In the 1980s the Oxford theologian John Macquarrie is reported to have said, “There was once a time when ‘God’ was on everybody’s lips and they spoke of him often but today we rarely refer to him. ‘God’ has been retired from daily speech.” Whatever life God had formerly enjoyed in the thought-worlds of believers has been slowly ebbing away in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Legacy of God

Today outspoken atheists are inclined to celebrate with glee the gradual disappearance of God from his once central place in Western culture, but I believe a more fruitful and balanced judgment is to acknowledge what an exceedingly important role the idea of God has played in the community human thought world of the past. First of all, it provided the human thought-world with a unifying centre. It served as a kind of final authority to which all human questions could be referred, a phenomenon that became crystallized in our common saying “Only God knows!”

Second, the idea that God possessed the key for understanding everything in the natural world is the reason why Christendom—and to a lesser degree Islam, but significantly neither India nor China—was the cultural context in which empirical science slowly emerged. Today many regard science and religion to be in conflict with each other, but they forget that originally it was theology that supplied the motivation for the development of science. Indeed it is the theologian Roger Bacon (1214–1292) who may be said to have been the first empirical scientist, for he set out to understand “the Ways of God” by devising experiments. And the now prestigious Royal Society, founded in 1660 for the promotion of empirical science, was in its early years full of clergymen.

Third, the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, with its declaration that God had become enfleshed in humankind, eventually led to the modern secular world. One may rightly marvel at the fact that centuries of maturation in the human thought-world resulted in a reversal of the relationship between God and humankind; for whereas our forebears believed that God made humankind in his own image, we have now come to see that it is humankind who has made God in its own image. This reversal has had the effect of turning the doctrine of the incarnation on its head: instead of blindly obeying what we take to be the dictates of God, we must now take full responsibility for living up to our highest values: love, justice, truth, and compassion. Thus we may even claim that the emergence of the modern secular world, with its scientifically based culture and new burdens of moral responsibility, was the natural development of the central doctrine of Christianity, the incarnation. 



Llyod Geering was Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University, Wellington until his retirement in 1984. He is the author of many books, including *Reimagining God* (2014).

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