

Sermon**A Different Sort of Theology:
Einstein's God**

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Albert Einstein lived his life dazzled by this world. This universe. Filled with wonder, and insatiable curiosity, and, what he himself called a “cosmic religious sense.”

He was, of course, a Jew, though not a practicing Jew; he rejected religion as we commonly speak about it; but, you know what? He might have fit right in here among us. Really. He was awed by the wonder of creation and thrilled with everything he did not yet understand. While his faith was certainly not traditional, he lived in astonishment at the marvels of the cosmos. How is *that* different from reverent?

He discarded the idea of god as a huge person, an entity, any sort of being, but like his contemporary, Paul Tillich, he *experienced* the numinous. Numinous is a word popularized by Rudolph Otto. It is an experience that fascinates, compels, invokes awe, and perhaps trembling. We might call it an encounter with “the holy.” Call it curiosity, call it wonder, call it a religious sensibility, all his life Einstein was *reverent* before the splendor and order of nature.

He wrote: “A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty — it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man.

I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the type of which we are conscious in ourselves... Enough for me the mystery of the eternity of life, and the inkling of the marvelous structure of reality.”

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All his life he lived with this great enthusiasm. You know, as I read his quotes, I kept thinking of Mary Oliver and her reverence for the mystery and beauty of the world. She wrote:

“ . . . all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

. . . I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.”

Einstein did not merely visit this world. He was endlessly, totally, fully enraptured by it.

He wrote: “ . . . Science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration towards truth and understanding. This source of *feeling*, however, springs from the sphere of religion.”

(Notice there is nothing here suggesting a sky god or a separate being, but still he declares his orientation religious.)

He continues, “To this there also belongs the faith in the possibility that the regulations valid for the world of existence are rational, that is, comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith. The situation may be expressed by an image: Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”

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Einstein speaks of religion very much as many Unitarian Universalists do.

Often as I stand at this pulpit I try to bring into language this experience of the numinous that makes me a religious person, that makes our Unitarian Universalism a *religion* and not an ethical culture society. Like Einstein, I cannot talk about my beliefs without an immediate disclaimer that I don't believe in the sort of God who is out there somewhere judging and punishing and keeping track.

But, I claim that our curiosity toward the mystery at the core of living and our endless search for meaning makes us religious.

Who knew that I would find language for my beliefs while reading Einstein?

He believed that the universe is unfolding according to laws and these laws will someday be understood.

I think a spiritual practice is something you consciously do to connect yourself with what opens your heart. Fascination with the world led Einstein to his religious practice: physics.

He believed there was order out there, and in here. When newer science talked about the disorderly nature of particle physics, that's when he uttered his famous declaration: 'God does not play dice with the universe.' He believed that there was ultimate order, something deeply hidden behind everything. Particle physics and its randomness, at least apparent randomness, called this sense of ultimate order into question.

Einstein wrestled with all sorts of big questions. He proved that space and time are not absolute but are relative to the position and velocity of different observers. I read Freeman Dyson explaining Einstein's general theory of relativity. Dyson explained Einstein's theory that matter causes space and time to curve and light to bend. These theories (or discoveries), gave rise to the Big Bang theory, the discovery of black holes, and quantum mechanics.

Largely beyond my comprehension . . .but no wonder Einstein could write:

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

Isn't this world, this universe, miracle enough for any of us?

He wrote an essay for the New York Times Magazine in 1930 in which he said, "I'm not an atheist and don't think I can call myself a pantheist. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many different languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn't know what it is. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God."

"The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image; so that there can be no church whose central teachings are based on it."

“There can be no church whose central teachings are based on it” (But wait!! Isn’t that the very thing Unitarian Universalists try to do? Create a church community with this very mystery known by so many different names and in so many different ways at the center?)

Back to Albert: “Hence it is precisely among the heretics of every age that we find men who were filled with this highest kind of religious feeling and were in many cases regarded by their contemporaries as atheists, sometimes also as saints.”

Can’t you squint just a little and see our motley community as *this* kind of religious?

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It’s that time of the year, the time of transition to dark and rain when even you, dear friends, are occasionally just the tiniest bit cranky. It happens every year about this time. Really. Very predictable, though not fun. You may be noticing that everywhere the path seems a little steeper. Home. Work. Other communities in which you participate.

Yet gathering as a community, a religious community in fact using Einstein’s definitions, pushes us through, carries us when the way is hard and our companions are annoying. In spite of autumn, without the leaves of New England or the promise of a first snow, we still care profoundly for one another. We are bound together...and this too will pass.

Let me close with a quote about Einstein by Studs Terkel, the television host and radio staple for decades, and a Pulitzer prize winner:

“Einstein once observed that westerners have a feeling that the individual loses his freedom if he joins say, a union or any group. Precisely the opposite is the case. Once you join others, even though at first your mission fails, you become a different person, a much stronger one. You feel that you really count; you discover your strength as an individual because you have along the way discovered others share in what you believe, you are not alone; and thus a community is formed. I am paraphrasing Einstein. I love to do that; nobody dares contradict me.”

Blessed be.

