



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“The One and the Many Names of God”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon delivered on January 25, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

God has a million faces. BAGHAVAD GITA, Hindu scripture

I am that. I am that which is highest. I am that which is lowest. I am that which is All.
Julian of Norwich, 14th century English nun

[God] is found in all things and all things are found in God, and there is nothing devoid of divinity, heaven forfend. Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, 16th century

The word God has become empty of meaning through thousands of years of misuse...Nothing can adequately define or explain the ineffable reality behind the word. Eckhart Tolle

Sermon

If you saw the title of this service in advance or even when you walked in this morning, I suspect some of you said to yourself, “This service isn’t for me.” And, I suspect others of you said, “Finally, a service for me!” Am I right?

There is probably nothing as polarizing in the world, and in our UU congregations, as the topic of what or who is God or is not. This congregation may not be as multi-cultural as we’d like, but it certainly is multi-theological. We joyfully embrace a variety of beliefs, even while that diversity creates challenges to how we worship or even if we worship, as well as in the language we’re comfortable using when we do whatever it is we do.

Yesterday I participated in a multi-racial panel discussion about the lack of racial diversity in ‘the body of Christ,’ as they named the Christian church. We shared the goal of racially mixed communities equally, but I felt a little bit of an outsider because of the religious language being used. Many speakers expressed a desire to put Jesus in their hearts so that upon their death they would go to Heaven. These are fine sentiments, but that’s not my theology. I needed to interpret their faith statements as a desire to put love in our hearts so that we could help create Heaven on earth, now, before death. I was happy to participate and translation allowed me to make their theology meaningful. It also helped that I believe God has many names, many faces, and many meanings.

You may know I don't call myself a theist because I don't believe in a supernatural God who acts or responds to events in the world. But, that does not mean the word God is meaningless to me. I also believe the meaning of God cannot be captured in one little word. God is not God's name, nor does God have only one name. God cannot be limited by one name or one idea. As Hindu scripture says, God has a million faces, a million names.

In the story I told this morning the elephant can stand for 'all of existence' or God. We are like the blind men feeling only a portion of the big mystery. And each one of us may hold a different view of God and what it means to be human and alive. None of us really know the whole of existence. Life is a mystery and we simply hold on to a part of it as best we can.

In the Hindu tradition and source of that story, God is one and many. All the different gods you may know, Krishna (god of love), Ganesha (god of journeys), Kali (goddess of death), Lakshmi (goddess of prosperity), and a million more, they are avatars or embodiments of one supreme deity known as Brahman. Brahman is not a being, but is *beyond* being. In Hindu scripture Brahman is "the unchanging reality amidst and beyond the world [which] cannot be exactly defined."

A being is a defined thing. Brahman exists everywhere. Ask a Hindu where God is, she will point to herself. "Namaste," 'the divine in me greets the divine in you' expresses that God resides inside us, too.

In Islam, God or Al-lah, meaning 'the god', is said to have at least 99 names. For example, God the Merciful, the Majestic, the Forgiving, the Provider, the All-knowing, and the Judge. Islam gives God many names because no single name can encompass all that God is. Just as no single word fully represents God, neither can a single image. For this reason Muslims refuse to picture God. They also refuse to picture Muhammad, not because he's God but because Muslims don't want either God or the Prophet to be idolized. When the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* ran pictures of Muhammad, Muslims were offended because they felt their religion was being disrespected. Although I feel the magazine was insensitive and provocative, it cannot justify violent retaliation by terrorists.

Judaism also bans images of God. When Moses came down from the mountain after meeting a God whose mysterious, not specific name was "I am that I am," to find his brother Aaron leading worship with a golden calf, in a fury Moses destroyed the idol. The Second Commandment forbids such practices. Throughout the Hebrew Bible God appears as anything but an old man in the sky. God is a burning bush, a storm cloud, in the silence, a glory of light, and in Isaiah, as a being so immense only a tiny portion of God's robe could fit inside the temple.

Isaiah's God overflowing the temple suggests God's limitless nature. The passage is poetry, a pointing to something larger than can be fully articulated.

Christians give God three names, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and these can be understood expansively, too. The father is the parent who loves, cares, guides, and disciplines his children. The human son is the divine in each of us, showing us how we should aspire to live. And the Holy Spirit is the breath of life and love within us, inspiring us.

If we allow God to be small and limited, then God is only a supernatural being who sees and knows all and acts in the world like some super-being. But this romp through world religions shows we need not understand God too literally. Religion has always been poetic and symbolic. To pin down one understanding of God inappropriately limits God. God's many names and ideas point towards something more than can be described adequately.

Theologian Paul Tillich, sometimes accused of being an atheist, names God ‘The Ground of Being-Itself’ or ‘the ground of all being’. To him, God is not a being, because that begs the question, who created that being? God must be *beyond* being. The poetic ‘ground of all being’ makes God foundational, that which all else rests upon. That’s not supernatural, but natural.

As a religious naturalist, I can relate to God if it means that which supports or connects all existence. Sounds like another way of naming Dark Matter, the material scientists have identified but can’t see in the universe. In fact, they think this elusive Dark Matter connects the universe and is the primary material of the universe. Space is not empty or void, but filled with this intangible stuff. Even the scientists wax poetic by naming it Dark Matter.

If God can mean so many things, does the idea of God lose meaning or make our discussion pointless? I don’t think so.

I think that when we explore ideas about God, we’re trying to understand why we exist, what we are to do with our lives, what is our relationship to all that exists, and what holds ultimate worth or is more important than our own lives. Science and religion can both contribute to our answering these questions.

Unitarian minister and educator Sophia Lyon Fahs wrote in *Today’s Children, Yesterday’s Heritage* [page 179-180]:

The religious way is the deep way, the way with a growing perspective and an expanding view. It is the way that dips into the heart of things, into personal feelings, yearnings and hostilities that so often must be buried and despised and left misunderstood. The religious way is the way that sees what physical eyes alone fail to see, the intangibles at the heart of every phenomenon. The religious way is the way that touches universal relationships; that goes high, wide and deep, that expands the feelings of kinship. And if God symbolizes or means these larger relationships, the religious way means finding God; but the word in itself is not too important. It is the enlarged and deepening experiences that bring the growing insights and that create the sustaining ambition “to find life and to find it abundantly” that really count most.

Life is a mystery. Dark Matter is a mystery. The Big Bang is a mystery. Love is a mystery. God is a mystery. Given how misunderstood the word God can be, understandably some of us choose not to reference God at all. *But because diverse beliefs reside within these walls, not just outside them, expanding our ideas and names for God can help us find common ground or language for sharing our deepest hopes and concerns.*

Let me close with two quotes. The first comes from Paul Tillich in his book, *The Shaking of the Foundations* [Chapter 7]:

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself.

The last quote comes from the great 13th century Sufi poet, Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.
I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language – even the phrase 'each other' –
doesn't make any sense.

May we meet in that divine field.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What name do you give to that which you hold to be of ultimate worth or may claim your allegiance or obedience? Describe what you've named or share something about it.
2. What face, name, or idea of God is most meaningful to you, and why? Least meaningful?
3. How do you feel when you encounter the word *God* at UUFA or elsewhere? Which of the million faces of God do you see or imagine? Please share your thoughts and feelings.