

In the Image of an Imageless God

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I want to start out this afternoon by acknowledging that I know there are a good many Unitarian-Universalists for whom the word "God" is problematical, uncomfortable, and possibly even contentious. If you're one of these people, I want to begin my reflections today by asking for your patience. I'm afraid I will be using that word rather extensively this afternoon. My hope is that my homily today might help broaden the dialog between us on this aspect of the spiritual life of our community.

To begin with, I spent a good deal of my early life trying to avoid the G-word. I was someone who preferred to say "gesundheit" instead of "God Bless You" when someone sneezed because it felt dishonest to invoke the blessings of a God I wasn't sure I believed in. Since then, I've spent a good deal of time and effort trying to find a deeper and more personal way of relating to the transcendent.

It's been a long and winding road, to quote Paul McCartney, and it's taken some surprising twists and turns along the way. As a teenager, I came to understand that the idea of God I'd grown up with -- of an omniscient and omnipotent personal deity who rewards goodness and punishes evil, of a sort of grand puppeteer pulling strings from some exalted heaven -- was not sustainable. For starters, I couldn't imagine how such a God would allow such horrors as wars and holocausts to happen.

Still, I couldn't dismiss the felt sense I'd also had since childhood of something more than human consciousness, something that transcended my everyday awareness. I spent the next fifteen or twenty years wrestling with what I *could* embrace, not as a matter of belief, but rather as a lived experience of something beyond all the words and images and names people use to refer to the Divine.

In the course of my spiritual wandering, I've come across many paradoxes concerning the Divine. Among them is one that has continued to fascinate me for more than a decade. It is a paradox that has its roots in the Torah, the central text of the Jewish tradition. In the very first chapter in Genesis, we are told that God created the first humans in God's own image. Then, in the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Torah, the Israelites are expressly forbidden to make any images of God because, the Rabbis teach, God is without and beyond any image we might make of God. So here we're left with a sublime paradox, that we are made in the image of an imageless God. How might we to make sense of this profound enigma?

Of course, the idea of a supreme transpersonal consciousness that is beyond form is one shared by a number of major religions. In Hinduism, for example, Brahman is the ground of being, the source from which everything emerges and into which everything returns. Of the many Gods worshipped by Hindus, none is thought to be eternal and ultimately transcendent. They, like anything that can be named and for whom images can be conceived, are thought to be manifestations of Brahman, that which is beyond names and forms. And Lao-Tsu, one of the founders of Taoism, taught that the Tao, which is both the source and the driving force behind everything that exists, is ultimately ineffable and beyond description.

Even in the West, the mystical forms of the three monotheistic faiths -- for example, the Kabbalah in Judaism, Gnostic Christianity, and the Sufi tradition in Islam -- all teach about a Divine consciousness beyond names and images. So in asking what it might mean to be made in the image of an imageless God, we are engaging a mystery that been explored by many religious seekers across many traditions for thousands of years.

In my exploration of comparative religion, I also learned that Christian mystics have spoken since the Middle Ages of two paths to encountering what Meister Eckhart called "the God beyond God." The first they called the "Via Negativa," the way of negation, of emptying-out and acknowledging what cannot be said about the Divine. In Hinduism, this path is summarized by the Sanskrit phrase "Neti, Neti," meaning "Not That, Not That." One can point at anything, including all of our ideas, and say "Neti, Neti," for whatever we are pointing at is not ultimate reality.

Christian mystics also spoke about the opposite path from the Via Negativa, which they called the Via Positiva, a spiritual practice which seeks to find the Divine spark in everything. For Hindus, the opposite of "Neti, Neti" is the Sanskrit phrase "Tat Tvam Asi," meaning "Thou Art That." Just as one can point at anything and say "Neti, Neti" because whatever we're pointing at, whatever we're naming and imaging, is not God, so too can we point at anything and everything and say "Tat Tvam Asi," because the Divine includes all that is.

In Judaism, the imageless God is also, in a sense, nameless. Observant Jews refrain from writing down or saying the name of the Divine. Yet the Torah tells us what the name of God means. In the story of the voice that spoke to Moses from the burning bush, Moses asks how the voice should be described when speaking to the people of Israel. According to the King James translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the voice is supposed to have replied "I AM THAT I AM."

This translation from the ancient Hebrew, as happened quite often, is actually a mistranslation. In the original Hebrew text, the verb in the utterance from the bush was in a conditional tense. As a result, what the voice actually said was "I will be what I will

be" or "I am becoming what I am becoming." In other words, the voice was not claiming to be an object, but rather a process, the process of becoming, of unfolding, of evolving. Indeed, the voice spoke of that which is endlessly self-transcending.

If the Divine is unnamable and incapable of being reduced to any image or definition we can imagine, then so are we being made in the image of God. The human person is always more than any definition can name, endlessly, infinitely more. This is why evolved forms of religious understanding should be an iconoclastic, smashing any idol, any image that claims to convey the totality of God. At the same time, we should be willing to smash any images created by the academic disciplines of human scholarship that seek to reduce human beings to our functions as social, sexual, economic, or political creatures. In the end, like the unfolding Divine process from which the human spirit draws its life, it is the "more" that makes us fully human.

In the words of Michael Bogar, a scholar of both religion and depth psychology, "Frozen or engraved images do not work well to stimulate creativity or for growing human consciousness. The human mind needs to expand. In fact, the Universe of creative potentials thrives on new images and fresh unfolding. All that we see around us emerged through the human imagination - from the invention of the wheel to the automobile, from the discovery of fire to the splitting of an atom. Human imagination is amazing as it channels the infinite realms of eternity into human awareness and material form." Bogar ends this thought with a warning: "When we freeze our Gods into images, we freeze our own consciousness and stop creative expansion."

This is one reason why Unitarian-Universalists insist that "revelation is not sealed," that God is revealed to each new generation in new and original ways, ways that may well be unlike any prior revelations. Yet each new revelation -- like the masks that the Divine wears when it appears to us -- is a communication from a consciousness transcendent of ordinary human awareness.

The final question I'd like to explore this afternoon is, perhaps, the most important one: What might it mean to live one's life from the perspective of being made in the image of an imageless God?

As many of you know, my background is in the field of mythology, especially the role mythology plays in the development of human consciousness. A primary focus of my studies has been on the destructive impact of the Western tendency to dismiss myth as irrelevant to modern life. Part of the impetus to dismiss myth as irrelevant stems from our desire to be free of old, outworn myths which have constrained both personal life and social progress. Part of it quite rightly stems from our fear that myths can provide justification for harming others or for inflicting one's beliefs onto others.

As a tradition, Unitarian-Universalism has long understood these dangers. Perhaps that's why we make such a virtue out of iconoclasm. Yet the desire to abolish religious myth, to live in a world free of sacred images, is doomed to failure. This because we humans need stories and symbols to make meaning out of the stuff of our lives and to find our place in the grand scheme of the cosmos. The question, then, is not myth or no myth, but rather how to ensure that our sacred stories remain alive and open to new and ever-evolving dimensions of meaning.

As the great mythologist Joseph Campbell often said, the surest way to kill the ability of myths to inform our lives is to turn their symbols into graven images, to engage in what amounts to idolatry. When we freeze the images in our stories -- most of all those in our sacred stories -- we limit our potential for growth and evolution, both as individuals and as a species.

Likewise, when our sacred myths are left open to new revelations of our potential for a deeper, more profound relationship to the holy, they stimulate our capacity for insight, curiosity, imagination, creativity, and compassion. When, like the voice from the burning bush, we recognize that -- like the imageless God in whose image we are made -- that we, too, are endlessly becoming, when we dedicate ourselves to that process of constant unfolding, we fuel the fires of evolution and feed the spark of the Divine within and among us.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.