

## THE FACES OF GOD

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
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God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Today's gospel lesson<sup>i</sup> begins to lay out a Trinitarian view of the one God of the universe. God has three different faces, which we might also describe after millennia of development of Trinitarian theology, as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of the universe.<sup>ii</sup> But Christians have used lots of other words to describe the faces of God down through the centuries: king,<sup>iii</sup> lamb,<sup>iv</sup> good shepherd,<sup>v</sup> light,<sup>vi</sup> Word,<sup>vii</sup> truth,<sup>viii</sup> comforter,<sup>ix</sup> Almighty,<sup>x</sup> Eternal,<sup>xi</sup> Alpha and Omega,<sup>xii</sup> and many, many more. Judaism, the fount of Christianity, records a wide variety of faces of God too: for example, "To the psalmist, God is a midwife; to Isaiah a comforting mother; in Exodus, the ultimate Being; in Haggai, a wife."<sup>xiii</sup>

The reading from Psalm 104<sup>xiv</sup> refers to God's face in saying that "When you hide your face...[all creatures of the earth] are dismayed."<sup>xv</sup> To seek the face of God is to seek his favor. The great blessing from the Torah that's used by Jews and Christians alike is "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."<sup>xvi</sup> But as we've now seen, the images of God, and therefore the faces of God, are very diverse.

That's true in other religious traditions as well. Muslim doctrine and devotion speak of Ninety-nine Names of God. With a string of beads, what Christians call a rosary, Muslim worshippers recount the many titles for the Divine while running the beads through their fingers. Some of these faces from the Qur'an are the Friend, the Guide, the Guardian, the

Advocate, the All-seeing, the Merciful, Beneficent, Compassionate, Patient, Gracious, Gentle, Just, Sublime, Wise, and Loving One.<sup>xvii</sup> The Hindu *Mahabharata* celebrates the Thousand Names of the Lord Vishnu, among them Creator, Giver of Peace, the All-Knowing, the Uplifter, the Lover, the Holder of the Wheel of the Cosmos, and the Protector.<sup>xviii</sup> Fire is also an image or face of God in Hinduism, just as it is in the burning bush in the Jewish Torah, and in the tongues of fire representing the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost in the New Testament book of Acts.<sup>xix</sup> (Hence our panels of fire on the chancel today by artist Sukey Bryan).

So, why does all of this really matter to those of us who are here in Memorial Church today? Perhaps if you're already a deeply devotional person -- meditating or chanting or using prayer beads -- knowing that God has many faces would help you in your spiritual practice. Or, if you're a scholar of religion, you'd have a good time comparing the similarities and differences among the various faces of God as described in numerous traditions. If you're a theologian, you might want to systematically study and explain the distinctions among God's faces as creator, sustainer and redeemer, or among God's faces as king, shepherd and lamb, or among God's faces as just, merciful, and sublime. But for the rest of us, how does this help us get through today or help us experience a better tomorrow? And what if we have trouble with believing in God in the first place? Then how does all this talk about the faces of God have any significance whatsoever?

I think the short answer is that virtually everyone actually does believe in some kind of God with some kind of face – and what kind really matters for us, today and tomorrow. So, how do I get there? For starters, I turn to one of my favorite spiritual writers, and our Baccalaureate speaker out in the Main Quad last year, Roman Catholic nun Joan Chittister.

She's written that if she's asked these days if she believes in God, she answers quite differently than she would have earlier in her career. She used to believe that God was male. Now she finds that impossible. She no longer thinks that all the statements in the Apostle's Creed, that she still recites, are factual in the sense of being historical, provable or real: For example, "Jesus Christ, God's only Son, Our Lord, was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day, he arose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." Not factual, historical, provable or real.<sup>xx</sup>

She also no longer thinks of religion as "a list of answers designed to resolve the unanswerable." Instead she sees religion simply as a way to address the "questions that plague our lives and puzzle our hearts" about the meaning of life. Then, "God" becomes a term related to the mystery of life, a way of connoting the seriousness of the great existential questions, not a supernatural person in the sky who intervenes from time to time in human life on earth. She explains that we live in a world now "where true and false, right and wrong, know no single color, no one creed, no clerical status." "God" becomes a stand-in term for our musings about ultimate concerns, as the theologian Paul Tillich would put it.<sup>xxi</sup>

In that sense, there really are no atheists. "Everybody believes in something. There is no such thing as an age of 'unbelievers.' Some believe in self-determination and some believe in God the puppeteer. Some believe that reality is a mirage and some believe that reality is all there is. Some people believe in a God of wrath, others in a God of love. But underneath all of them there is one constant: Whatever we believe at the deepest center of our being determines what we ourselves become, even when we say we believe in something else." The risk of not believing in an ultimate reality and ultimate meaning beyond oneself is that "I

worship gods of my own making – money, power, prestige, approval, things. I insist that I will worship nothing I cannot see, and so instead I worship all the things I do see, with all their limits, all their limitations, and all the limiting they do to the expanse of my soul.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Chittister writes, “In the long light of human history, then, it is not belief in God that sets us apart. It is the kind of God in which we choose to believe that in the end makes all the difference. Some believe in a God of wrath and become wrathful with others as a result.” Some believe that the ultimate truth is cosmic indifference, and then “when they feel themselves alone, as all of us do at some time or another, [they] shrivel up and die inside from the indifference they feel in the world around them. Some believe in a God who makes traffic lights turn green and so become the children of magical coincidence.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

Chittister explains that she’s known all of those Gods in her own life: “They have all failed me. I have feared God and been judgmental of others. I have used God to get me through life and, as a result, failed to take steps to change life myself... I have allowed God to be mediated to me through images of God foreign to the very idea of God: God the puppeteer, God the potentate, and God the persecutor make a mockery of the very definition of God... [Such] a deity is not a god big enough to believe in. Indeed, it is the God in whom we choose to believe that determines the rest of life for us...[W]e grow in the image of the God we make for ourselves...“If my God is a harsh judge, I will live in unquenchable guilt...If my God is life and hope, I will live my life in fullness overflowing forever.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

So virtually all of us do believe in some kind of God with some kind of face or faces – and what kind really matters for us, today and tomorrow.

Harvard scholar of religion Diana Eck, who’s a Methodist Christian, was confronted on one of her research trips to India by a man in his eighties who had rarely met a Westerner

and perhaps never a Christian. She tried to explain what he considered to be her “chosen god,” Jesus Christ. After she explained that most Christians say he was the only incarnation of God, he asked, “But how is it possible to believe that God showed himself only once, to one people, in one part of the world, and so long ago?” Eck writes, “The implications were clear in the expression on...[his] face: What kind of stingy God would that be? What kind of small-minded, self-centered people would believe in such a God? To him it was clear that the full, embodied disclosure of God to men and women was not only multiple in time and place, but potentially infinite.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Fair enough, Diana Eck, later came to agree. When the claimed uniqueness of Jesus Christ is used to exclude the stranger of another faith, or deny the value of another faith, it is stingy, small-minded, and self-centered. It’s also not what Jesus taught. After all, Jesus turned to a hated foreigner outside of his own religious tradition, a Samaritan, to describe the essence of how to be loving,<sup>xxvi</sup> which he called the greatest commandment.<sup>xxvii</sup> On the other hand, there may be something unique about the Christian theological claim that Jesus Christ is simultaneously fully human and fully divine. This claim presents one face of God – a face that the Hindu whom Diana Eck met might find, with deeper contemplation, could expand his own understanding of God and affect for the better the way he lives his life.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Likewise, as she studied Hinduism, her comprehension of love was expanded by coming to understand the Lord Krishna as having a unique story of luring those who loved him “away from conventional pride and possessiveness and of overturning the human hierarchies of power and social order.”<sup>xxix</sup> Krishna has a number of faces for his worshippers: a baby with unconditional love for his mother and she for him; a child with a heroic friendship

for his village friends; a romantic lover with the milk maidens who adored him; and a king or lord with respectful, service-based love for all of his subjects.<sup>xxx</sup>

In similar fashion, Jesus Christ has a number of faces for his followers: the not-yet of the annunciation to his future mother, Mary, filling her with the most powerful sense of hope imaginable; the divine child with unconditional love for his mother and she for him; the healer who could be counted on to free others and make them whole; the suffering servant who faces torture and gruesome execution and can therefore stand by us in our lowest moments; the risen Christ who continues to bring an unimagined, transforming joy to all who walk in his footsteps. And of course there are many other faces of Jesus Christ that we could recite as resonating for us.<sup>xxxi</sup>

So, in conclusion, it matters a lot which faces of God we see and which faces of God we are compelled by. God is there, and a panoply of faces is there, whether we like it or not. We can be constrained and diminished by faces that are frightening, wrathful, judgmental, persecuting, diminishing, or merely indifferent. Or we can be enlivened and transformed by faces that are creative, sustaining, redeeming, loving, hope-filled, gracious and welcoming. And of course there are many other faces of God that could be described. The choice in all of this is ours: on the one hand, to look away, to cover our eyes, to open our eyes only to life-repudiating faces, or, on the other hand, to be aware that God is always there in some form or another, to search for the most positive faces of God, and to open our eyes to that which affirms life and lights up the world. May the latter be our choice.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> John 14: 8-17, 25-27.
- <sup>ii</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), pp. 70-71.
- <sup>iii</sup> E.g., Matthew 25:34.
- <sup>iv</sup> E.g., John 1:29.
- <sup>v</sup> E.g., John 10:11 and Psalm 23:1.
- <sup>vi</sup> E.g., 1 John 2:8.
- <sup>vii</sup> E.g., John 1:1.
- <sup>viii</sup> E.g., John 14:6.
- <sup>ix</sup> E.g., John 14:16.
- <sup>x</sup> E.g., Rev. 1:8.
- <sup>xi</sup> E.g., Psalm 90:2.
- <sup>xii</sup> E.g., Rev. 1:8.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2006), p. 25.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Psalm 104: 24-34, 35b.
- <sup>xv</sup> Psalm 104:29.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Numbers 6:22-26.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The House of Islam* (Belmont, CA: Dickenson, 1969), pp. 8-14.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Chittister, *Search*, p. 23.
- <sup>xix</sup> Acts 2:1-4.
- <sup>xx</sup> Chittister, *Search*, pp. 1-2.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3, 10.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 20.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 81.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Luke 10:25-37.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Matthew 22:34-40.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Eck, *Encountering God*, pp. 86-87.
- <sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- <sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.