

THE DIVINE MYSTERY
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“When I say ‘God,’ it is poetry and not theology. Nothing any theologian ever wrote about God has helped me much, but everything that poets have written about flowers, and birds, and skies, and seas, and the saviors of the race, and God... has at one time or another reached my soul.”
- John Haynes Holmes, Unitarian Minister

An elephant was enjoying a leisurely dip in a jungle pool when a rat came up to the pool and insisted that the elephant get out.

“I won't,” said the elephant.

“I insist you get out this minute,” said the rat.

“Why?” said the elephant.

“I shall tell you that only after you get out of the pool.”

“Then I won't get out.”

But the elephant finally lumbered out of the pool, stood in front of the rat and said, “Now then, why did you want me to get out of the pool?”

And the rat said, “I wanted to see if you were wearing my swimming trunks.”

We often do the same thing to God, trying to put a rat's bathing suit on an elephant. Anthony de Mello, Jesuit priest and author of *The Song of the Bird*, wrote, “An elephant will sooner fit into the trunks of a rat than God will fit into our notions of him.” ...or her ...or it. As Spinoza wonderfully said, “The idea of a circle is not round and the concept of a dog does not bark.”

Today, we explore the divine mystery. The Bhagavad Gita, one of the major sacred texts of Hinduism, wonderfully addresses the relationship between the intimate

imagery of God as a person and the ungraspable vastness of the Divine.

In this Song of the Blessed One as the title is translated, Arjuna is riding off to battle against evil forces. His chariot driver is Krishna, who turns out to be God Incarnate. Krishna, although blue and with four arms, appears more-or-less like a human being. As the battle is about to begin, Arjuna begins to fear the fight ahead. Time freezes and Arjuna and Krishna begin a sacred conversation about the truth of existence, the paths of spirituality and the nature of God.

Throughout several chapters of the beautiful poem, Krishna describes who he truly is. But in chapter 11, one of my favorite passages from any sacred text, Arjuna asks for more than words. He wants to see.

Arjuna says, “You have described your own vast, imperishable Being. I do not doubt that you are what you say you are, Lord. And yet I want to see for myself the splendor of your ultimate form. If you think I am strong enough, worthy enough to endure it, grant me now, Lord, a vision of your vast, imperishable Self.”

And Krishna responds, “Look Arjuna: thousands, millions of my divine forms, beings of all kinds and sizes, of every color and shape. Look: the sun gods, the gods of fire, dawn, sky, wind, storm, wonders that no mortal has ever beheld. Look, Arjuna! The whole universe, all things animate or inanimate, are gathered here - Look! - enfolded inside my infinite body... Look! Look! The depths of my power.”

The Gita goes on: *“After he had spoken these words, Krishna, the great Lord of Yoga, revealed to Arjuna his majestic, transcendent, limitless form. With innumerable mouths and eyes, faces too marvelous to stare at, dazzling ornaments, innumerable weapons uplifted, flaming - crowned with fire, wrapped in pure light, with celestial fragrance, he stood forth as the infinite God, composed of all wonders. If a thousands*

suns were to rise and stand in the noon sky, blazing, such brilliance would be like the fierce brilliance of that mighty Self. Arjuna saw the whole universe enfolded, with its countless billions of life forms, gathered together in the body of the God of the gods. Trembling with awe, his blood chilled, the hair standing up on his flesh, he bowed and joined his palms.”

Like Krishna’s infinite form, I believe that God is the All, the whole of everything that exists, the totality of reality. French philosopher André Comte-Sponville writes, “We are in the All, and whether it is finite or not, it surpasses us (goes beyond us) in every direction; its limits, if it has any, are permanently beyond our reach. It envelops, contains and exceeds us... It is an inexhaustible, indefinite immanence, whose limits are undefined and inaccessible. We are inside it – we live within the unfathomable.”

Yet I want us to consider how enormous, and thus utterly incomprehensible the All truly is. We each are one of over 6.5 billion people on our planet. Just to put that in context, if you were to count to 6.5 billion, saying one number per second, it would take you more than 206 years to count that high. Now, our sun is one of 200 billion stars in our galaxy. And our galaxy, although nobody really knows for sure, may be just one of 500 billion galaxies in our universe. It would take almost 6000 years to count to 200 billion and almost 16,000 years to count to 500 billion. I couldn’t even figure out on my calculator how long it would take to count each of the 70 sextillion stars in the visible sky.

This is a vastness we cannot possibly relate to. And it is no surprise, then, that when we confront such enormity, we experience as Arjuna did, both awe and terror.

Physicist Chet Raymo said it powerfully, “Let your soul go free for a moment into

that scene outside your window... and there encounter gape-jawed and silent, the God of birds and birth defects, trees and cancer, quarks and galaxies, earthquakes and supernovas – awesome, edifying, dreadful and good, more beautiful and more terrible than is strictly necessary. Let it strike you dumb with worship and fear, beyond words, beyond logic. What is it? It is everything that is.”

This is why, as John Haynes Holmes tells us, theology *always* falls short. And only poetry can suffice.

Soon after Krishna fully reveals himself to Arjuna, unable to handle the awesomeness of what he sees, Arjuna asks Krishna to return to his human form. Recognizing the immensity of what he has just experienced, he asks which form is it better to worship – Krishna as he is now or as the unutterable.

Arjuna says, “One man loves you with pure devotion; another man loves the Unmanifest. Which of these two understands yoga more deeply?”

And Krishna responds, “Those who love and revere me with unwavering faith, always centering their minds on me – they are the most perfect in yoga. But those who revere the Imperishable, the Unsayable, the Unmanifest, the All-Present, the Inconceivable, the Exalted, the Unchanging, the Eternal, mastering their senses, acting at all times with equanimity, rejoicing in the welfare of all beings – they too will reach me at last. But their path is much more arduous because, for embodied beings, the Unmanifest is obscure, and difficult to attain.”

And there it is... in this ancient text, we have a sacred version of a story about a little boy crying out in the night to his mother. “As the boy cries out, his mother tries to calm him by saying, “Trust in God, son. It’s okay. God will take care of you.” And the boy responds, “But Mom, I want someone with skin on.” In this wonderful sacred text,

Krishna reveals that for most of us, it's easier, even better to worship a God with skin on... that it's okay to put a rat's swimming trunks on an elephant... that because of the overwhelming nature of reality, as countless people have done before, we can create our own images of the Divine.

And I would agree, as long as we remember that it's poetry, that we're choosing to relate to a metaphor. Because of our fears around religious fundamentalism, I think we take our religious images a bit too seriously, and feel that they are literal, and therefore must be challenged and rejected. While at times perhaps we must enter the theological debate, I think a poetic consciousness when it comes to God is much more in keeping with truth and wholeness. This is something I admire about India and Hindu culture.

I believe we all do create images of the divine mostly unconsciously anyway. For example, if I asked you all to tell me about the God you don't believe in, you could all probably tell me. But there is something powerful and freeing in allowing ourselves to consciously choose, rather than have someone else choose for us, the images that have meaning for us. For example, you may need a tender, mother figure to help you get through a hard time. Or you may find that a fierce, football coach is going to get you to go the extra mile. You may experience shame around sexuality or power, so you might create a sensual God or a strong God. Cultures throughout the world have created countless images for you to pick and choose from... like Kali and the Green Man, like Sheela-na-gig and Cernunnos, like Shiva and Green Tara, like Jesus and Mary.

And we certainly don't need to limit our images to people. We may find the image of a lion very powerful, or a sunflower, or a web, or a sunrise, or a nebula. The point is to ask yourself, "*What images to me are worthy of that which I hold most sacred?*"

But for some for us, God with skin on will not be a way that feels comfortable for us. For us, perhaps, we need to walk the harder path, where we relate to the Universe as directly as possible. André Comte-Sponville in his wonderful writing, *A Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, writes of an experience when he felt that kind of deep connection with everything. He says, “Night had fallen. We were walking. Gradually our laughter faded, and the conversation died down. Nothing remained but our friendship, our mutual trust and shared presence, the mildness of the night air and of everything around us... My mind empty of thought, I was simply registering the world around me – the darkness of the underbrush, the incredible luminosity of the sky, the faint sounds of the forest... only making the silence more palpable. And then all of a sudden... What? Nothing: everything! No words, no meanings, no questions, only – a surprise. Only – this. A seemingly infinite happiness. A seemingly eternal sense of peace. Above me, the starry sky was immense, luminous and unfathomable, and within me there was nothing but the sky, of which I was a part, and the silence and the light, like a warm hum, and a sense of joy with neither subject nor object (no object other than everything, no subject other than itself). Yes, in the darkness of that night, I contained only the dazzling presence of the All. Peace. Infinite peace! Simplicity, serenity, delight.”

Ultimately, though, these two ways of spirituality (devotion and interconnection) meet in the middle... where we come to experience everything as a reflection of the divine. We see God everywhere... in the look of a child, in the silhouette of a tree, in the falling of snow, in the fading of the sun, in the walk of a stranger, truly everywhere, in the color of a taxicab, in the smoke of a cigarette, even in the passion of an enemy.

I encourage you to take some time to let the ordinariness of life enter into you, for a moment to settle, to breathe easily, to just look, to just listen, to just sense, to allow

your mind to quiet and your heart to warm. And if you're lucky and things fall into place just right, maybe, just maybe, you'll experience the divine all around you.