

Reflections on God-I-Am

Lois Williams

I am, as a hospice chaplain, often asked in some varying form, “Who or what is God?” Of course, there are agreed-upon descriptions and names as communities attempt to describe the vision of God that works for them. But for everyone, not exclusive to those that don’t go to church, God and Its expression vary for every individual, and I believe that one’s God concept can change moment to moment dependent on the circumstances. Does that make anyone’s version of God wrong?

The stages of faith by Fowler do not represent a change in the Divine expression; instead, they propose a change in the individual based on the “empty tablet” becoming educated and then experienced, through life, to a level of universality and inclusiveness. This is clearly represented in the adventures, myths, and religious history of the Hebrew people that became the root of several religious traditions. The God that seemed violent as represented by *Jehovah Sabaoth*, Lord of Host, King of Armies, over time changed to a God that “so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” Did God change? Or did humans evolve into a more compassionate understanding? Is that the mysterious plan of God in the first place? Is it not God who changes but us?

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There is also the near universal view that God is the Creator, the unmovable first mover, the air around us, the love within us, and many more visions of God that, again, are cultural, social, and still intimately personal. I believe the intimately personal view of God is where the real work of chaplaincy, of the death doula, of the minister to souls, begins. We are called by the very nature of our work, without judgment, to reflect back to those who are struggling with their own vision of God. It is here where some of the greatest spiritual and sometimes physical pain resides. In some newer spiritualities, the trauma of our lives that spill into our vision of God can create anything from *soul injury* to *soul murder*. We have all seen these people throughout the everydayness of our lives, and, more often than not, no one sees the pain, possibly because we are all to some degree suffering from the same confusion as to what the Divine is or is not to us and then figuring out whether that Divine relationship is actually working for us or preventing us from moving forward.

Did the representation of a parent, a father or mother, filter onto an image of the Divine? The idea that we are made in God's image seems appropriate when deeply pondered in relation to who is God. The question "Who is God *to you*?" is kind of abrupt but is the real point of journeying into after-life questions, which are bound to come up in a hospice environment. Add into the equation that if there are four people in the room having this type of discussion, there are essentially four "Gods" in the room. This is possibly why religious traditions have often tied themselves to moral rules and dogma to rein in the possible 'clash of the Gods' in a community.

For myself, being a witness to someone's thoughts on God is an honor and a blessing. If I am able to help them release their traumatic versions of a punishing or angry God, their guilt, or worries by just being present (which in a way is modeling my version of God—one of great compassion), it often leaves me with no words to express my gratitude at participating in a spiritual healing. Of course, there are those times of feeling ineffective and days of self-doubt within my own spiritual support system.

I would propose that all who enter ministry consider who/what their vision of God is. When you turn the mirror on yourself, is there a positive vision? If you are the image of God, Who is smiling back at you? After finding these definitions, be assured they will change, sometimes daily, as you experience the various ways God is represented to others.