

## My God May Not Be Your God – And That’s OK

I am a non-theist. That’s different from an atheist, and I’ll explain how. That may not be where you find yourself in your conception of God, and we can both live with that – I hope.

Any of you who have been at church the last few Sundays, or likely any Sundays this fall, will have picked up that my sense of God, and our relationship with God, is filled more with questions than with answers. A significant portion of these questions are about the nature of God itself. My faith and my understanding continues to develop and to evolve, so here is a snapshot of where I find myself at this time.

To start with, I have to define some terms – based on my own understanding of these things, and using terms I can handle. These are much-simplified definitions, because I don’t think it’s necessary to go into all the angles and arguments of deep theology to engage in this discussion.

A ‘theist’ is one who conceives God as a personal being, outside the normal run of our sensory experience, who interacts with creation and human beings at least occasionally, a supernatural agent making things happen or not happen. A theistic God has a personality, although that personality may be somewhat unfathomable to we humans. A theistic God is the God of most of the history and much of the current practice of Judaism and Christianity, among other faiths with similar approaches. Many theistic understandings include the idea of an afterlife – some continuation of personal existence and experience after death. If one thinks of God as if God is somehow like a person, and speaks *to that God*, then one is a theist.

An ‘atheist’ is one who understands that there is no God as such, in any form or through any intellectual conception. For an atheist, the full human experience includes only the world we inhabit, only the universe we know and seek to know, and life is limited to the here-and-now from birth to death. One’s spirit, if an atheist can even speak of spirit at all, begins and ends with the span of life as we experience it. Atheism is one form of humanism, where the human experience itself, with all its capacity, is the highest and greatest aspect of reality.

A ‘non-theist’ is one who has a conception of God as a power, force and energy within, behind and beyond all that is, including humankind. The notion of non-theism is relatively new to theological discussion, and there is still a fair range of understandings of just what non-theism means. Most easily, perhaps, non-theists may describe themselves by what they are not, as in *not an atheist* and *not a theist*. Some non-theists will describe God as “the ground of our being” as German theologian Paul Tillich did in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or “the Absolute”, or “summum bonum” (Latin for *the highest good*) or “the Holy” (as I sometimes do).

So what does being a non-theist mean for my understanding and practice of Christian faith? It’s important to know that as a non-theist I still have a deep sense of faith. As I said earlier, though, my faith is still evolving. My non-theism is less than completely defined, and involves some decidedly gray areas for which I have not yet formed clear notions.

Generally, I have come to stop praying *to God*. If God is not a personality, then it makes no sense to pray that way. Oh, I can still use the language of *conversation* when I speak about prayer, because that’s language to which many of us can relate, comfortable language that still allows for the deep connection of oneself to holiness at the heart of everything. So my prayers are most often not *to God*, but rather *about God* and *about ourselves*. In the choir I can still sing about God as *He*, even though that’s no longer part of my personal vocabulary of faith. Unsatisfactorily, the best English pronoun we have for my sense of God is *IT*.

Prayer for me is primarily about the direction taken in our lives and the lives of other people, influenced and idealized through the powerful aspects of God we experience in many moments and ways. It isn’t a wish list to God, like a Christmas list to Santa. It’s isn’t so much about what we want,

as it is about trying to conform ourselves and our world to what we believe is the holy vision for us and for everything.

Common phrases in prayers I write or speak are “May we ...”, “May they ...” or “May the world ...”, as I pray about the transformation I hope we can make from the way things are now toward the way things could be at their best. Prayer is a way to touch and express the deepest nature and compass of our spirits. If God is found within us at that depth too – as I believe – then prayer becomes an intimate and personal connection at the deepest level of our createdness and blessedness.

I’ve written a more in-depth essay on prayer – you can find it on our church website at [knosunitedchurch.ca/downloads](http://knosunitedchurch.ca/downloads) , and I’ll include it in the next issue of this newsletter.

While this changed approach to prayer may be the most easily discerned aspect of my evolving faith, there is more to it than just that. What about Jesus? Do I still believe in Jesus?

The short answer to that is yes. But that answer has no depth, and begs fuller explanation. For me, as for former United Church Moderator Bill Phipps some years ago, Jesus was a human being in whom was found as much of the presence of God as it is possible for a human being to hold. Jesus was not, and is not, all of God, because God’s power and place is also beyond Jesus himself. In our ongoing experience of Jesus, we recognize the powerful Godly influence he continued to have after his death, on his followers and those with whom they lived and worked, and then on those like us who through the centuries have experienced the presence of God in our humanity in a deep and personal way. So I am still quite content and, I believe, truthful to name myself a Christian, feeling and knowing the influence of God as Jesus in my human-ness. However, I do see *some* non-theists moving well beyond my sense of the term *Christian* in their personal and public profession of faith and understanding.

I remain convinced of the presence of the Spirit of holiness – Spirit of God if you will – within each of us, as our connection to God of all things, and our connection to each other in our shared humanity. I remain Trinitarian at its most basic, understanding the Trinity as a powerful symbol of the many ways people experience God in their lives.

Mostly, I remain deeply engaged in my ongoing search for fuller depth and breadth in my understanding of all of this, all that we capture in the shorthand code-word ‘faith’.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Bill Phipps". The signature is stylized and cursive.