



January 1994

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Diana Eck

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### Recommended Citation

Eck, Diana (1994) "Encountering God," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 7, Article 8.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1096>

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# Encountering God\*

**Diana Eck**  
**Harvard University**

IN THESE EXCERPTS from her new book, Diana Eck describes her own theological journey – from Bozeman, Montana, to Banaras, India, from the Gallatin River to the Ganges – and the common journey of American culture to meet the challenge religious diversity poses to people of faith in every religious tradition.

## Frontiers of Encounter

The world has always been one of religious diversity and interaction. From ancient times to the present, people have encountered and have had to interpret for themselves the religions of their neighbours. Herodotus, encountering the mysteries of Egypt, identified Egyptian gods as ancestors of the more familiar gods of Greece, assimilating the foreign into the familiar. When early Buddhist monks travelled along the Silk Road from India to China in the third century, they had to speak of the Middle Way of Buddhism in language that would be understood by Taoist and Confucian sages. Buddhism changed and so did China. When the first Muslim generals and their armies came to India in the eleventh century, the scholar Alberuni was with them, taking upon himself the task of trying to understand the religiousness of the Hindus, who, he found, “totally differ from us in religion, as we believe nothing in which they believe and *vice versa*”. His *Kitah al-Hind* (Book of India) might be seen as one of the earliest works of comparative religion. It is a book

which closes with a prayer to God “to pardon us for every statement of ours which is not true”.

The Hebrew prophets interpreted the Canaite gods as impotent idols, nothing but dust, blocks of wood. The early Christians interpreted their Hebrew background in light of what they saw as a new reality, the Messiah, the crucified and risen Christ. Christianity is an interpretation of Jewish traditions and Jewish hopes, but the church also moved in the Greco-Roman world among people who had never held those traditions and hopes, who did not know the language of the Hebrew prophets, and Christians had to offer an interpretation to them as well. In Athens, Paul stood in the agora and spoke of the god to whom the Athenians had erected a shrine marked “to the Unknown God”, and he quoted the Greek poets who spoke of the one “In whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17: 28). In the second century, the Christian theologian Justin Martyr insisted that the God of the Bible was surely the God of Plato as well, and that the activity of God, the Logos, fully present in Christ, is universal and is seen wherever intelligence and goodness are seen. Interpreting the “other” in light of our own experience and tradition has always been a religious necessity and a religious challenge.

What is new today is not the diversity of our religious traditions nor the task of interpretation. What is new is our sharply heightened awareness of religious diversity

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\* From: Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, Beacon Press, 1993. Reprinted with permission of Beacon Press.

in every part of our world and the fact that today everyone – not just the explorers, the missionaries, the diplomats, and the theologians – encounters and needs to understand people and faiths other than their own. In the hundred years since the days of the World's Parliament of Religions, all of us have come to a very new place in our religious history. For much of the world's population our religious ghettos are gone or almost gone, and the question of how we respond to religious difference is unavoidable. Hasidic Jews live in neighbourhoods adjacent to those of Korean Buddhists and African American Muslims. Some may retreat into voluntary isolation again, claiming the loyalties of religion, ethnicity, race, or language ever more insistently, but the exigencies of an interdependent world will not permit such a response for long. The question of difference is not only a cultural, social, and political question. It is also a theological question, as people in each religious tradition think about what it means to embrace a particular faith in full recognition of the power and dignity of other faiths in the lives of their neighbours.

Diversity, of course, is not pluralism. Diversity is simply a fact, but what will we make of that fact, individually and as a culture? Will it arouse new forms of ethnic and religious chauvinism and isolation? Or might it lead to a genuine pluralism, a positive and interactive interpretation of plurality? These are critical questions for the future, as people decide whether they value a sense of identity that isolates and sets them apart from one another or whether they value a broader identity that brings them into real relationship with one another.

In 1893 the census declared that the frontier line was no longer traceable on the map of America. But there were other frontiers that were just beginning to be visible. These were the frontiers of encounter, where it was no longer a question of pushing out the known borders of settlement into what was "unsettled land",

but of reaching the known borders of one community and encountering others. These were the frontiers that were just beginning to be visible in 1893 – in America's encounter with the native peoples of the continent; in European America's encounter with Asian immigrants; and in Christian and Jewish America's encounter with people of other great faiths and civilizations. Today these frontiers of encounter and many others like them are everywhere. They are local and global, east and west, north and south. It is at these frontiers that our common future will be defined.

### **The One Across Whom Space and Time is Woven**

The language of God's oneness is continuous in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. All three faiths placed the problem of how to interpret the oneness of God in the context of polytheistic traditions. In the early years of the Christian community, for example, the task of Paul was to interpret the Gospel in the context of the religious and intellectual life of Greece and Rome. We have already referred to the story of Paul's encounter with the people of Athens and their gods (Acts 17:22-28). He points out the shrine marked "To an Unknown God" and proclaims to the people that the one they worship as unknown is the One God who made heaven and earth, who made the world and everything in it, and who made all the nations from one ancestor so that they would seek God and find him. When Paul wanted to communicate the scope of this unknown God, it was a Greek philosopher that he quoted, speaking of that One "in whom we live and move and have our being". The words are deeply familiar to those of us who are Christians; they are an intimate part of Christian liturgy and prayer. Through Paul, Christians have adopted and thoroughly integrated that language of the Greek philosophers into our very conception of God's ultimacy and God's mystery.

The God language I was first attracted to

as a student was that of Paul Tillich, whose words constantly pointed toward the One "in whom we live and move and have our being". He spoke of "ultimate reality", the "ground of being", and "the depth dimension". In an essay called "The Depth of Existence" Tillich wrote, "The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*. That depth is what the word *God* means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. "Depth" does not have to be translated into Father, or into Lord and King. God is height, but also depth; transcendence, but also intimacy. God is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the beyond' in the midst of our life".

It is not surprising that with Tillich on my mind, the first Hindu literature that attracted my attention was the Upanishads. There too was the language of sheer ultimacy and intimacy, a language that is not the sole preserve of any religious tradition, but is used with consummate power by the Hindu sages of the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. I would agree with the German philosopher Schopenhauer, who called the Upanishads "the most elevating reading the world has to offer". He read Anquetil Duperron's Latin translation of the Upanishads and wrote, "It has been the solace of my life and will be the solace of my death".

For those of us who would speak of God today as well, the language of the Upanishads is compelling theological language. These teachings on the spiritual quest are largely dialogues, queries into the nature of the Divine, or of the Real. They pose some of the most provocative, intriguing, puzzling questions and contain some of the most exciting spiritual discourses in all religious literature. The Svetasvatara Upanishad, for example, begins with the question "What is the cause? What is Brahman? Whence are we born? Whereby

do we live? And on what are we established? Overruled by whom, in pains and pleasures, do we live our various conditions, O ye theologians?" The questions are foundational and refer to that which Tillich would call Ultimate Reality. I have used the word *Divine* here; one might also deliberately use the term God to convey the force of this reality to those of us in the Western monotheistic traditions. The terms used in the tradition itself are *Brahman*, the foundational, impersonal divine reality; *Ātman*, the foundational, divine reality within, sometimes spoken of as the soul or real self; and *Sat*, or Truth, Reality, Being. These terms all point to the same reality.

In both the Hindu and Christian traditions, only the real spiritual pioneers strike out on the trackless path toward God's essence. Most of us use our speech, our emotions, our conception as best we can, in poetry and prayer and action, to apprehend the One "in whom we live and move and have our being" in the context of our day-to-day lives. In both traditions Hindus and Christians affirm that God is revealed in ways that we humans *can* apprehend. We encounter not just "the unknown God" of the philosophers of Athens, but the many ways in which the Divine is known, face to face.

Quite frankly, the idea of "many ways" of divine revealing is a problem for many Christians, and for our Muslim and Jewish neighbours as well. It is just at this point that the Hindu tradition presents all of us in the monotheistic West with the world's most energetic challenge to take the multitude of God's names and forms seriously. Yes, we do have many gods, says the Hindu to the accusing Western monotheist, 330 million, to be precise.

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### Imagining Communities

Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, investigates the process through which nations imagine themselves

and imagine others. Indeed it is through this imaginative process that nations come into being. Imagination is key, for we must take note that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion".

Thinking about "imagined communities" in the context of our interdependent world raises many fascinating and important questions. It is clear that the most powerful mapping of the world and its boundaries is done not by armies, but by the power of the imagination which creates and bears for us a sense of *we* – national, religious, cultural, multicultural.

Both Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are among the many for whom the image of the household suggests our close relatedness. King introduced his talk "The World House" with these words:

Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: "A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together." This is a great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

A household gathers together a large and unusually complex extended family, with all the diversity of temperament and personality that human beings have. The imagined community of the household includes both hospitality and mutuality. A household may also have its hierarchies, but they are not the built-in hierarchies of the body. They will be open to challenge and negotiation. There is no household without its arguments, but

its foundation is undergirding love and its language the two-way language of dialogue. Can we imagine the world, locally and globally, as such a household? Can we imagine the diversity of religious faith and tradition as such a household?

A household cannot function on the underlying premise of exclusivity, though each community within the household may be exclusive in some things, such as its central rituals. A household cannot finally function on the underlying foundation of inclusivism either, for it will have to be our household as human beings, not ours as Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists, to which everyone else is welcome. No one community can set the terms for the whole. The underlying foundation of the world household will finally have to be pluralism.

In a household, people meet and live with one another at close range. The Hindu and the Christian know the Muslim and the Buddhist, who rise before dawn for prayer and meditation. Each community hears and overhears the prayers and sermons, the songs and silences of the others. Their privacy is respected. Occasionally there are invitations to join in. There are some joint celebrations. Each community also hears and overhears the hypocrisy of the others. As in any household, we come to know one another at our best and at our worst. We cannot sustain our pretences to perfection.

Many religious traditions have their own distinctive visions of the imagined community of diverse peoples. In the Christian tradition, the dominant image of the community coming into being is the Kingdom of God – the world that God intends, the world of which we must be co-creators. The New Testament is filled with images of the Kingdom. This "imagined community" is not finally the Christian community, but the community of the whole inhabited earth. In Jesus' time, as in our own, the term kingdom was intended somewhat paradoxically. Jesus overturned the regal understanding and expectation of "kingdom", for what was envisioned by

Jesus was not like any earthly kingdom. This imagined community would not be imposed from above and ruled on high, but would grow from the smallest seeds, like big bushes from tiny mustard seeds. It would be a kingdom inherited not by the rich and powerful, but by the poor, by the widows, the homeless, and the strangers. This community would not secure its identity by dominion or exclusion, but was imagined to be an open house for all the peoples of the earth, coming from East and West, North and South, to eat at a table together. This imagined community is not off in the future in some heavenly place and time, but among us in community in this very world and within us. It is not some place, but this place transformed by justice and filled to the brim with peace. The Kingdom of God is much wider than the church. It is the Kingdom of God, not of the Christian church. The role of the immediate followers of Christ in bringing this to be is not imagined in grandiose language, but the most humble of domestic language. We are to be like yeast in the bread dough, like salt in the food, like a light to the path.

At the end of the final book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, is another imaginative vision. At the centre of this vision is a holy city where it is forever daytime. The gates of the city stand open in every direction and are never shut. Through them come people from throughout the world, bringing out into the city the "glory and the honour of the nations" (Rev. 21-22). Saint John's vision draws upon the earlier imaginative vision of the prophet Ezekiel, who also saw the city and the temple. In Ezekiel's vision, from underneath the main

door of the sanctum of the temple, facing east, a stream is flowing. At first it is ankle deep, then knee deep. Gradually it becomes a great river. Its waters are the waters of life, pouring forth from the temple and bringing life, abundance, and healing wherever they flow. Saint John, too, saw that river, flowing with living waters, though in the city John saw there was no temple at all, but God alone. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." And the water of life is free. "Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

It is a beautiful image. There is no temple, only the river of the water of life and healing flowing from the very presence of God. Having journeyed from Bozeman to Banaras, I know that this image of the river of life is not our image alone. I cannot read the final chapters of Saint John's imaginative vision without seeing the Ganges in my mind's eye. For Hindus it is the River of Heaven, flowing from the foot of Vishnu, falling to the head of Shiva, touching the earth on top of its highest mountain, mount Meru, and then generously splitting into four channels to flow in four directions, watering the whole of the earth with streams of blessing. The stream of the River of Heaven I know best flows south into India and even today skirts the sacred city of Banaras where pilgrims come to bathe at dawn. But surely the Jordan is one of those streams of the River of Heaven – and the Gallatin as well.