

# If there's a God in nature, which one?



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

Someone wrote to me asking if I see God in the natural world. The simple answer is that I do not. Yet, this frequent question continually leads me to ask another: Which One?

Humans have seen divine activity or felt a sacred presence in nature for as long as we've been around. Many claim they have heard a voice, seen a face, felt the touch of "the holy" in the forest, on a mountain, by the ocean, in their garden. I have no doubt that something happened to them. But if that something is

named "God," I have to ask: How do you know? And, to which God are you referring?

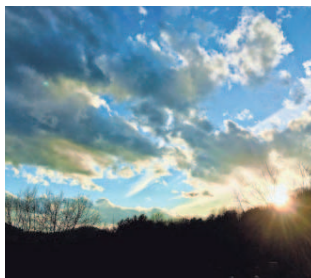
Most of those I hear from refer to the biblical God, Jesus or a "spiritual presence" that often seems to circle back to an Abrahamic religious belief. And usually there is a human quality to the experience, and specific to a language and culture. Of course, as we know, God speaks English. That's a joke, but doesn't it seem that a majority of these encounters with the divine, at least most we hear about, occur to English-speaking people, or even more narrowly, in an Americanized context? For one thing, that "face" is invariably white.

Take the appearances of Jesus or Mary or a saint – all Christian. Someone hears a voice and it's "obviously" Jesus. Do people stop to think, if they lived in India they might be hearing the voice of Krishna? In Arabia, Allah?

Many Fundamentalists who don't believe in evolution seem to be unaware of several things: scientists and most of the rest of us don't "believe" in evolution either (it's not a belief, it's an evidence-based view of life on earth – no one "believes" in gravity or the sunrise) and Darwin himself spoke of Providence and a Creator. He was probably agnostic, but he wasn't anti-religious. Many of the American Founders spoke of Providence as well. It's a Deistic viewpoint – "Nature's God" – not beholden to one particular religion.

So, is there a God in nature? It depends on how one defines "God" and depends on our personal experience and education. It also greatly depends on one's definition and view of "Nature." Most of us were raised with the worldview that believed God was "up" and nature

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**The world in natural light.** CHRIS  
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“down here” with us. Along with that view, God was male (“Father”) and nature was “His creation.” Though God is invisible, God is somehow “visible” in the created world.

When I saw a small bird suffer and die outside my window this morning I could have thought back to what I learned in Sunday School: not a sparrow falls but our Heavenly Father sees. So, are we to understand that God “sees” and “hears” but can’t or won’t act? A person suffers and dies and we hear that God cares. There’s no way to see that or measure that. “Take it on faith.” “Just believe.”

For most of us, I think, that’s inadequate. If a divine being made the world as it is, so full of imperfection and suffering, why do people pray, and why to a “God of Love”? I was told, “Prayer moves the hand of God,” but does it? Is it meant to get God’s attention: “Hey, could you please do something here!?” If we have to wake the Creator up each time we need assistance, that’s not a very impressive deity. A parishioner in Tennessee, whose church was destroyed and many neighbors killed by a tornado said: “God is good! God saved me. He [steered] that train around me.” And he ran over those others?

Meaning no disrespect to the lady and the way she copes with disaster, I don’t see any God like that involved in the world, inside or outside nature. Frankly, if that’s the way God’s “plan” works, I sure wouldn’t accept either the plan or the Planner. What I do see is a wild kind of beauty, creativity and life as well as destruction and death in nature – a completely natural universe operating with natural laws. Not a world where “suffering teaches lessons, so just watch what happens” is the main “plan.” It’s a world we can accept as it is, and accept nature the way it is – the wonderfully unpredictable world described by Robert Burns: “Wildly here, without control, Nature reigns and rules the whole.”

If “divinity” refers to the messy mix of everything, the incredible diversity we are a part of, open to endless exploration, then, sure, I see all that. I wouldn’t call it divine, sacred or god. And though I’m no pantheist, there is a kind of logic in the words of the Hindu Bhagavad Gita: we are “all in one.” Maybe that’s enough said?

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at [chighland.com](http://chighland.com).*