

The Almighty: Elohim elephant in the room



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

A student in one of my courses on Religion and Philosophy recommended the film "Trip to Infinity." There are interviews with physicists, mathematicians, philosophers and others reflecting on the notion, the inconceivable concept, of infinity.

The infinite. As one of my religion professors in college explained, to call something or someone "infinite" says almost nothing. He reminded us that you can't define something with a negative. To say God is not finite, doesn't convey any knowledge at all about God. Hindus say the divine is "not this, not that," which doesn't tell us much. We say God is in-visible, so we can't see God. What have we learned? Isn't "almighty" a similar expression?

"Almighty" suggests that God is all-powerful, a being with limitless power. This God is all-able to do anything and everything. Does this mean that God actually does everything, controls everything, makes it all happen? If not, we have to say this God is not all-powerful—perhaps "mostly-mighty" but not "all" mighty. If a deity "can" do anything and everything but doesn't, or won't do everything—such as eliminate suffering—what's the purpose of all that power?

Let's try to visualize this. I see someone suffering. I could act. I'm powerful enough to do something, but I choose to hold back, to wait for the person to beg me to help while praising my power. I want them to know I'm

near and I care, to believe I possess the power to help them, that I'm certainly mighty enough to alleviate their suffering situation—but for a "greater purpose" I choose not to. I want them to learn something by suffering. Is that a comforting image?

Some believe suffering is a result, a consequence, even a punishment for, disbelief. People make poor choices, or they get sick, face natural disasters and other misfortunes; they are frail and fragile, vulnerable and victimized beings "loved by God"—yet the Mighty One looks at them and sees "fallen sinners." The All-Powerful One could lift them up, and feels sad about it, but for "lessons of faith" decides to sit this one out. How does that sound?

We know the cliche: "Might doesn't make right." Except, couldn't might make right? Couldn't a Mighty Being make things right if that Being chose to do so? Incarnate Power could turn wrong things into right things, right? Might it be said that the righteous makes righteous? I'm wordplaying here, but unpack those terms and we get a pachyderm—the Elohim Elephant in the room. My pastoral wife's Bible Dictionary tells me the early biblical name for God was "El" (borrowed from Canaanite religions; often used in plural form: "Elohim"), a "general Semitic term for deity which is probably derived from a root denoting power or strength." Think of the names "El-ijah," "El-isha," "Dani-el," "Beth-el" or even the name "Isra-el." According to my source: "Yahweh was known at first as El Shaddai" (primarily in Genesis and Exodus). If you're still with me, El Shaddai may have meant "God of the Mountain" and possibly "God of the Breast," a feminine reference, similar to the "Shekinah" presence before Moses.

All of this scholarship brings us back to the basic

problem: If He, She or They have unlimited power and can do anything and everything, why doesn't God do everything? The universe is in-finite, limitless, with no boundaries, no end point. Is God outside of it, out beyond the end, "looking down" or "looking in" to all the finiteness? Is God greater than infinity, outside of natural laws, physical elements, dark matter, black holes, and everything...something in nothingness?

Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People," recently died. I read his book in college and was impressed. It seemed to let God off the hook for all the bad things I saw and experienced. As I recall, the good rabbi wasn't actually defending God or faith so much as explaining that some things are inexplicable, beyond our knowing, yet ultimately faith says: "God is good and good can come from any bad." Making the best of suffering, even if it makes no sense, and God doesn't seem to show up. Just believe that we are loved and there may be a greater purpose; so do the best you can and keep the faith. Something like that.

I find that totally inadequate now. Those who defend the indefensible decision by an Almighty Creator God to sit back and observe while terrible stuff happens, make it sound like humans are mere playthings. This isn't much different than what some preachers try to convince us: "God has a plan for your life"—"No matter what, have faith and trust because He loves you."

This leads to infinite questions.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).