

Invite.
Embrace.
Include.
Empower.



FAITH4ALL

Inclusive Times

Latest Edition:

This edition will consider the importance and challenge of seeing divinity in the other.

Issue No. 7

January 2022



Seeing Divinity In the Other

As I write this article, Christmas is approaching and, for the first issue of the **Inclusive Times** in 2022, I request your indulgence of allowing me to write on a topic not directly associated with the transformative paths faith communities can take to invite, embrace, include, and empower the diverse range of faithful people living with disabilities into active lives of faith in their institution. I ask for your grace in this way because, recently, I was powerfully moved by reading a short reflection written by a friend and contained in a devotional of my church, the [First Congregational Church of Boulder](#), CO. I believe that it contains a valuable message which is important for people of all faiths.

The title of the weekly devotional written by my friend, Larry Dansky, is "[Sacred Manifestations of the Divine](#)". (His devotional can be read by clicking the above title and I will also include a PDF of Larry's work in the email that contained this edition of the Inclusive Times.) Larry's devotional stresses the value of the practice of seeing the Divine in others and points to a commitment of trying to listen deeply to the Divine spark which rests at the core of all humans! (It is my own panentheistic belief that all life — no, everything in the universe — contains this Divine spark at least to some extent.)

Many people of faith admit to seeing reflections of the Divine in **some** others. For example, parents, loved ones, and newborn children are commonly understood as containing the Divine, or are thought of as part of G-d's family. However, seeing certain other individuals this way is more challenging. Thoughts of some bosses or politicians, and especially certain historical figures, might compel most people to doubt the claim that the Divine spark fires within us all. Yet, the human tendency to understand only **some** others as following in the paths of the Divine is very hurtful to others and especially to the self. Held by many, such beliefs impair the growth of care and concern in all people and societies!

I believe that the inability to see others as reflections of the Divine, or containing a spark of the Divine, leads many people to deny compassion toward, and a habit of distancing themselves from, many people living with disabilities (PWD) today. In fact, I believe that at the root of the limiting, negative treatment of PWD is the essential (if unconscious) denial of the very humanity of PWD!

Whatever the origins of the sometimes negative treatment of PWD, considering PWD as reflections of the Divine is a challenge for many believers, particularly those who understand humans to be creations of their G-d. Sometimes these believers are troubled by the age-old question: "How could an all loving, all powerful G-d make such mistakes?" Many books have been written on the "problem of evil", or theodicy and a few are referenced below*. I will delay addressing this issue until future issues of the **Inclusive Times**, but this is a **VERY** important topic, especially for believers who have been impacted by disability.

Here, I will briefly describe two issues that I believe must be addressed before a serious contemplation of the problem of evil can begin:

- Aside from superficial physical similarities, what makes us human?
- Can we consider the Divine as much more than a beneficent, powerful human being?

I will close this article by resounding this most important call: **we are invited to try to discover a spark of the Divine in others and work to inflame that spark in ourselves today, as well!**



At this festive time of year, we wish you the happiest of holidays!

Future Inclusive Times Topics:

- **Stigma associated with disability and mental illness**
- **Divine human nature**
- **Images of G-d**



*Any questions or comments regarding this e-journal or this organization can be directed to kevin@Faith4All.org.

Endnotes:

*Listed here are several books devoted to the topic of **theodicy**.

- Kushner, H. (2001). [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#). New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Lewis, C.S. (2009). [A Grief Observed](#). San Francisco, CA: HarperOne.
- Tada, J.E. and Estes, S. (1997). [When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Hick, J. (1966, reissued 2010). [Evil and the God of Love](#). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oord, T.J. (2015). [The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence](#). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Invite.
Embrace.
Include.
Empower.



FAITH4ALL

Inclusive Times

Latest Edition:
We will consider
human nature,
divinity, and any
overlap they might
share.

Issue No. 8

April 2022

Human Nature and Divinity

Considering the recent and ongoing slaughter of innocent civilians living in Ukraine, many see our human nature reaching a very animalistic low point. In fact, when describing the atrocities occurring there, labeling them as “animalistic” is to insult almost every species in existence today! While the human species sometimes achieves greatness, the briefest glimpse of human history or, what we’ve cared to record of our history, displays the appalling nature of many of our individual and collective actions. **Why might I ever consider human nature and divinity as existing simultaneously, even in any single individual?**

To consider the relation between human nature and divinity productively, it is best to agree upon definitions of each. Many scientists, including the author of [On the Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection](#)¹, would reasonably argue that the primary drive of all animals is the survival and procreation of the individual and thus, collectively, the species. The drive for survival is very strong indeed; however, I believe that reducing the drives of all species to simply survival and procreation limits all life unreasonably. In addition to survival and procreation, I believe that all life is driven to transformation and productive specialization. Indeed, this is what drives individuals as well as the development of distinct species!

The word divinity is often understood as referring to a particular theology or (often capitalized) a particular divine manifestation, or God. **Trying to be as inclusive as possible, what are the characteristics of divinity?** Despite the occasional calls for war and conflict made in the name of religion by a frightfully wide variety of supposedly “religious” actors, it is reasonable to posit these characteristics as representative of divinity: ultimate love, peace, concern for others, beneficence, transcendence, and joy, as well as power and some measure of control².

¹ “[On the Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection](#)” (1859) by Charles Darwin is available for download at [Project Gutenberg](#).

² Mawson, T. (2018). [The Divine Attributes](#) (Elements in the Philosophy of Religion). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
doi:10.1017/9781108598101,

Thus defined, I believe it clear that **the drive toward divinity is embedded in human nature**. The drive for a joyful, prosperous life filled with physical contentment, peace, friendship, and love -- are not these qualities for which all humans strive? Indeed, I believe these qualities represent the main life goals of most every person. But, if these are the goals for which all humans strive, **how is it that we all live with such violence and destruction in our communities and our world today?**

Though sometimes people *feel* that they're motivated by ideas (often considered as "noble"), most usually the primary motivator of violence and destruction is **greed**. Indeed, usually the "noble" concepts motivating the hurt and death doled out to others are ideas built upon the notion that only a certain group of people deserve life and joy, combined with the notion that others who live life differently are undeserving either life or prosperity. It is greed and unwarranted self-assurance which motivates these supposedly "noble" ideas.

Both greed and the drive for self-perpetuation are also embedded in human nature. Indeed, it is these drives which partially insure the survival, sustenance, and procreation of our species! Thus, **the conflicting drives of both divinity and egotistical survival partially motivate every human**. This is an important conflict inherent in human nature which leads many to frustration, confusion, depression, sometimes ending in death.

The solution to this motivational conflict we all share: the realization of our own finitude and reliance on others who are unlike ourselves for our very existence. Particularly in the cultures in the United States of America, people often embrace a perverse notions of individualism and self-reliance. Despite our seeming isolation and difference, **no one is alive without the beneficence of others!** People different from ourselves are essential for our continued sustenance and efforts today.

It is most important and particularly helpful to individuals and to society that we realize our reliance on others, the beauty of difference, and the essential nature of diversity!

May we all work to make this fact apparent to ourselves and to others!

◀F4A▶

We hope you are enjoying our Spring weather and praying for more rain!

Future Inclusive Times Topics:

- **Images of G-d**
- **The plight of PWD in areas of conflict**



*Any questions or comments regarding this e-journal or this organization can be directed to kevin@Faith4All.org.

Invite.
Embrace.
Include.
Empower.



FAITH4ALL

Inclusive Times

Latest Edition:

We will consider the definition of church, what it means to us, as well as what it means to others.

Issue No. 9

July 2022

Defining “Church”?

Marking our second anniversary of the creation of the **Inclusive Times**, I would like to step back and consider a fundamental question that many people might (or might not) have thought about directly: **What is “church” and how do we define it?** (Please remember that when I say “church”, I am **not** limiting my consideration to Christian gatherings only; what I have to say regarding “churches” applies equally to synagogues, mosques, temples, and houses of worship most generally.) Churches are places where a group of faithful people assemble to worship, celebrate, honor, and learn more of their calling and missions in life. **How does our definition of “church” impact different people differently, and faithful people with disabilities (PWD) particularly?**

If we take the common understanding of a church as a **building**, it has been common practice in Jewish Synagogues as well as Christian churches to elevate the floors of the sanctuary above the ground level. Often the bema, a raised dias from where the celebrant of the service preaches, is further elevated above the floor of the sanctuary. This is generally true of other houses of worship as well: the church and even the celebrant within the church are situated such that prominence and visibility are maximized. For this reason, the vast majority of houses of worship are elevated such that many are inaccessible to people using wheelchairs. To put it mildly, this is a “disincentive” for many PWD, even if they don’t ambulate with a wheelchair!

Many people also concatenate “church” and “congregation” and thus, many people understand the church as being a gathering of **people**. The deeply personal reflections that many worshippers perform at religious services and the general tribal nature of the human species both mean that we tend to congregate primarily with people of similar natures, similar ethnicity, similar racial origin, and similar ability/disability status. Because the majority of the human population does **not** have a disability and PWD make up roughly only 20% of most populations, as discussed in earlier editions of the **Inclusive Times**, in almost every congregation PWD make up only a very small fraction of congregants. **This means that, for many PWD, houses of worship have been a place of exclusion!**

While this certainly is **not** *universally* true, and many churches function as welcoming and inclusive places of respite, worship, and education; we all need to stay on guard and ensure that our churches (or synagogues, mosques, or temples) are places **enlivened** by people who are **different** from us! Remember, there is only one of each of us and we each bring unique perspectives and life experiences to our gatherings -- we need to celebrate this fact. They don't detract from our institution, **our differences make any gathered congregation stronger!**

Granted, sometimes to be truly inclusive we might need to change how things are done, what we expect of others, and even how we think; but **is this not what our faith leads us to do?** In order to be true to the core, any religion proposing a universal truth -- as essentially all do -- must foster faithful gatherings from which no one is excluded. (Such exclusivity undermines the validity of any truth claims that are made at such an institution.) While it is important and in a way beautiful that our faithful institutions maintain cultural ethnic flairs and different ways of thinking, we need to remember the good that each faithful organization is doing must be available and open to and welcoming of people who might look a bit different from ourselves -- be it different patterns of behavior, different ways of thinking, and even different bodily structures!

Please allow me to close with a quotation by [Tripp Fuller](#), who organizes the online pop-up learning community [Christianity in Process](#) and the podcast series [Homebrewed Christianity](#) . During a recent session of this class on [process theology](#), an explicitly interfaith theology, Mr. Fuller stated “[t]he living and life-giving G-d is going to call every community in any way possible to recognize the full dignity of all creatures”.

May we all hear and seek to respond to this call!

◀F4A▶

With this advent of summer, we hope you are still praying for more rain!

Future Inclusive Times Topics:

- **Images of G-d**
- **Stigma associated with disability and mental illness**
- **Divine human nature**



*Any questions or comments regarding this e-journal or this organization can be directed to kevin@Faith4All.org.

Invite.
Embrace.
Include.
Empower.



FAITH4ALL

Inclusive Times

Latest Edition:

We will examine different images of G-d and consider briefly what they mean.

Issue No. 10

October 2022

Images for G-d

In the last issue of the **Inclusive Times**, we examined the issue of defining “church” or a house of worship. As is apparent by this topic selection, clearly the writers of the **Inclusive Times** don’t avoid weighty subjects! This fact is apparent again in the topic of this quarter’s **IT** newsletter: **Images for G-d**. Clearly, this is a gigantic subject and this article will only serve to point out selected points of concern; however, we hope that this article can raise some important topics for your further consideration.

Many (though not all) monotheists affirm the saying taken from the first chapter of the book of Genesis: “So G-d created humans in his image, in the image of G-d he created them; male and female he created them.”¹ Thus, it seems that a large number of theists understand their G-d as at least somewhat like them. However, to what detail does this understanding extend?

Clearly, **all** details common to most of us are **not** ways in which our G-d is like us! Details such as chirality (or handedness), hair or eye color, precise height or weight are unimportant qualities of a person and are not shared by G-d.

Most people these days would include skin color or race with these obvious natures that don’t apply to G-d; however, this was a contended supposition for several centuries! The vast majority of people following the Abrahamic traditions understand G-d as sharing our common human nature. However, the natures shared by humans and G-d does **not** include the human tendency to sin and other human limitations like fragility, weakness, intellectual limitation, or a limited lifespan. Thinking about it further, we can see that, in a very large number of ways, G-d shares very little in common with us humans!

¹ [Genesis 1:27](#) (NRSV quoted)

Many followers of the Jewish tradition refuse to speak (or spell completely) the name of G-d. (It is to honor this tradition that the same is done in this publication.) Similarly, many follows if Islam refuse to draw or print images of G-d. Even though the different Abrahamic religious traditions share as sacred many of the texts which inspire these restrictions, I am unaware of ways that Christians similarly honor their G-d by restricting their language or use of images of G-d. (Long gone are the days when most Christians avoid using the Lord's name in vain!)

I note however that the honoring of G-d in this way might have inspired the Jewish philosopher [Martin Buber](#) to conceive of and elucidate the *Ich-Dou* (or I-Thou) relationship held between humans and G-d as well as different people². These thoughts of Mr. Buber's are said to have been inspired by by Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*³ and Søren Kierkegaard's *Single One*⁴.

As responsible theists (or believers), we all should compel ourselves to consider how the understanding of human nature as being similar to G-d's nature affects others. I am particularly concerned about how

the common understanding of G-d as all-knowing and all-powerful affects people whose fragility, weakness, limited intelligence, or impending death restricts their ability to live a life as fully as they'd like, or as many others usually expect. How might people living with disabilities interpret the Genesis passage quoted above? Are PWD made in the image of G-d also?

Clearly this question is impossible to answer succinctly because there are so many different answers to it! Many PWD consider their impairments as essential marks of fallen humanity and qualities which will be transcended in the eschaton. Others understand their inabilities as more fundamental to their personhood, though qualities which lose implication in the world to come. Considerable debate on the subject continues to this day⁵.

I resolve this question by simply considering only the very essentials: I understand humans as being similar to or made in the image of G-d **only** by the fact that we both can inspire or make changes in our reality. (Though, clearly, these changes are of very different magnitudes!) My faith rests in my belief that, if I can make as many changes to myself and to the world that follow the impulse or lure of G-d, I trust that such a path will bring me satisfaction and will benefit the world, as well.



² Buber Martin and Walter Kaufmann. *I And Thou*. 1st Touchstone ed. Touchstone 1996..

³ [Feuerbach Ludwig and George Eliot. *The Essence of Christianity*. 2nd ed. Trübner 1881.](#)

⁴ Kierkegaard, Søren, 1813-1855, Lillian Marvin Swenson, and David F. (David Ferdinand) Swenson. [Thoughts On Crucial Situations In Human Life: Three Discourses On Imagined Occasions](#). Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1941.

⁵ Habets, Myk (2016). "Disability and Divinization" in *Theology and the Experience of Disability : Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Voices Down Under*. Routledge 2016.

**“Oh Divine Creator, help me to help myself and the world by
pausing regularly, listening, and responding
to your divine lure in all ways!”**

Future Inclusive Times Topics:

- **Stigma associated with disability and mental illness**
- **Specific actions that promote belonging**
- **Where are PWD if not in a faith community?**



*Any questions or comments regarding this e-journal or this organization can be directed to kevin@Faith4All.org.

Note: Residents of Boulder County might be particularly interested in the new effort to promote [Mobility For All!](#)