

# Is There Room Enough for Everybody?

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Science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke writes a classic short story that goes roughly like this:

For 300 years, a particular Tibetan monastery has tasked its monks with listing all of the possible names of God. For reasons they don't reveal, they believe each name has nine letters in it from a special alphabet. They estimate that it will take 15,000 years to complete the list. All of the ordinary names – such as God, Allah, Yahweh, Krishna – are devised by humans, but in their tradition, the names must be entirely different from ordinary language. They are systematically working through every combination of nine letters with certain rules only they understand, such as no letter can be repeated more than three times in a row.

The high lama comes to New York to consult a technical company to adapt a "Mark V" computer which could complete the task in about 100 days instead of 15,000 years. The head of the company, on hearing this story, privately bemoans the follies that people can pursue instead of focusing on reality but keeps that to himself. The monk knows that the Mark V can be broken down into small components which can be easily shipped to India, and from there, the monks can get them to Tibet. They also want to hire two engineers to set up and operate the machine. Payment is arranged.

Three months later, we switch to the viewpoint of George, one of the engineers looking from one of the monastery parapets down the 2,000-foot cliff to the fields below. The computer has been churning out reams of paper with "gibberish" on them which the monks carefully cut into sections and paste them in giant books. George thinks it's crazy, but there's only a week to go now.

The other engineer Chuck comes out to tell him that he's finally heard what the project is all about. The monks believe that the purpose of humankind has been to discover all the names of God – nine billion of them – and after that there'll be nothing left for humanity to do. To carry on with anything would be a kind of blasphemy; God will simply wind down the Universe – mission accomplished so to speak. When Chuck says to the high lama, "Do you mean it's the end of the world?" the response is, "It's nothing as trivial as that."

George dismisses it as just more craziness, but Chuck is concerned that, when the end *doesn't* happen, the monks will blame *them*. They're four days from completion but seven days from when their transport arrives to take them home. He wants to create a glitch that will delay the finish until just before they leave.

And, indeed, seven days later they're heading down to the airfield on little mountain ponies. They look back up at the monastery, outlined against the sunset and watch its electric lights come on. They know at that moment that the last pages are being printed.

George looks over at Chuck, who's looking up into the sky. "Look," says Chuck.

As George looks up, "overhead, without any fuss, the stars are going out."

For my last Sunday service at the parish I served in West Vancouver, I included this story. My first candidating sermon for them set out my spiritual story; you've heard a lot of that in bits and pieces, but it was remarkable to them because I'm a believing UU and most of them thought there were no believers there. They were wrong, but believing was something to keep secret there. I believe in God, but I readily add that I don't know what I'm talking about. My belief is based in rationality *and* direct experience. No names or theological statements come with those experiences, just a certainty of Something Greater.

The fact that I do believe becomes quite a significant part of my ministry there, including a fair bit of doubt and even suspicion. So I assure them I don't care what any of them do or don't believe, and *for sure*, I'm not a stealth Christian, trying to inject dogma into freedom of belief. It works out pretty well, though for a while I actually made Wordles of my sermons—the old graphic-of-words kind, not the puzzles—so they could see how rarely I talk about God, or faith and such. So all that background is clear to us when I speak to them for the last time.

Only a couple weeks before that, a new visitor becomes really enthused about UUism because his first taste of it is our emphasis on rationality and he encounters so many atheists there. We happen to have a New Member Ceremony the week before and he joins. Then he comes to *this* service and that Arthur C. Clarke story. He asks a number of atheist members if they don't have a problem with that sermon, and they don't. He resigns immediately after the service! He hasn't had the time to encounter our pluralism. It takes time to make that large, encompassing theological position clear to those who come to us looking for a spiritual community.

Pluralism is what brought me to and keeps me in Unitarian Universalism; I doubt that I could find 'enough' pluralism, if you can say such a thing, anywhere else. I hope I don't continually blast the message that it's OK to be UU *and* to believe in Something Greater Than Yourself. When I do, my motive is to encourage open minds and accepting hearts so we truly have room for and welcome a variety of faith positions, including having no faith.

An unavoidable truth is that all of our experiences are grounded in the brain, including our mystical or even paranormal experiences. If we sense it, think it or move it, the brain registers it, if it didn't initiate it in the first place. What's more, neurological studies show that whether one is in a state of Contemplative Prayer or of Mindfulness Meditation, our brains are doing the same thing. Contemplative Prayer is a state of openness to whatever comes, be it an itch to scratch or a spiritual vision; it's like the Quiet Mind that Buddhism talks of. The openness goes in all directions. There are many different languages and traditions about such experiences—different contexts. Those are cultural and deeply ingrained in our cognitive processes, but physiologically, there's virtually no difference. So how important is it that we speak of these common experiences only with one set of words and ideas while rejecting others?

Dr. Andrew Newberg describes in his book *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*, focuses on the subjective, mystical state of being in touch with something beyond the self that is common to these practices.<sup>1</sup> He makes a bold claim that the *subjective* experience during a brain scan study is *itself* scientific evidence; yes, culture may determine the words or concepts used to describe the subjective experience, but the brain scan shows only the one state. He declares that neuroscience does not contradict the concept that there actually is a state he calls Absolute Unitary Being that people access through such practices. It's not proven, but neither is it disproven that the subjective experience reflects something real. This is an argument for peaceful pluralism.

In Dec. 2015, there's a story on *Tapestry* on CBC radio about Nancy Ellen Abrams, a lifelong atheist who turned to Overeaters Anonymous for help.<sup>2</sup> Needing that help desperately, she's willing to be willing: that's a phrase applied to those who feel there's no way they can use any definition of Higher Power in their recovery, but will keep an open mind that they might be willing someday to conceive of one. Although the literature uses the word "God," in practice a Higher Power need not be supernatural in any way.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/120939/why-god-wont-go-away-by-andrew-newberg-md-eugene-daquili-and-vince-rause/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/what-am-i-doing-with-my-life-1.3082096/a-god-that-could-be-real-1.3082308>

At first, Abrams simply uses the group as hers, but this isn't enough to protect her from compulsive eating.

Abrams then decides to seek some concept of Higher Power, even a "God" that is consistent with her own understanding of the universe. Respecting the results of the program for others, she starts to pray every morning as an exercise in this open search. Then one day she finds herself at a party with a sumptuous buffet of beautifully prepared and presented food, and all those around her are stuffing themselves. Abrams realizes *that* is when she should pray, and as she does her compulsion and temptation disappear. She doesn't think of this as a miracle, but that, in a moment, all she has learned about the truth behind compulsive eating becomes clear: her well-being does not depend on food. A huge weight is lifted off her in that moment. For a while after that, she feels totally opened up emotionally; she cries easily; her feelings are raw. These experiences are much like those experienced over millennia that people have described as spiritual or mystical conversions or awakenings, and she, an atheist, tries to comprehend what's going on.

She concludes that the question, "Does God exist?" is the wrong one. Instead she asks, "Does anything in this Universe exist that would be worthy of being called God?" Note this isn't a question about Supernature; she's asking it within this Universe as understood by science. She begins to eliminate the qualities ascribed to God that are scientifically impossible, such as existence prior to the Universe, omniscience, and such. Then her question becomes what we are really looking for when we seek God.

Abrams comes across a newly-developing idea within science: the concept of emergence. When there is a complicated interaction of many small parts, each part is just what it is, but the whole is something larger, more complex and qualitatively different: these new qualities *emerge* out of the simpler, smaller parts. For example, any individual ant can barely exist on its own and has a small range of capabilities, but a whole colony acts as a single complex system, with distribution of labour, even with diversity of physical bodies in some cases. This colony-organism is just as real as the individual ant, but its measurable effectiveness is far greater. The colony's capabilities are emergent from the mass of individual ants. It's fair to think of the colony as an entity above and apart from its individual ants.

Abrams writes a book, *A God That Could Be Real: Spirituality, Science and the Future of Our Planet*.<sup>3</sup> She proposes that God can only have emerged from human beings: from the "staggering complexity" of all human aspirations interacting together from our ancestors to everyone living today; our world exists as it does because of *their* aspirations. God, then, can be considered as the emergent quality based upon the sum

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total of human aspiration. God is lofty because our aspirations are; God is good because the vast majority of our aspirations are positive and constructive, even if there are many examples that are not. This concept of God connects every human being with every other, including our ancestors and our progeny. As a result, God is constantly changing and has constant influence on us to change. For Abrams, the 12 Step 'God of her understanding' is an accessible, helpful, emergent power contained within the physical Universe and created by the hearts and souls of all humanity.

We started today with Rumi saying that "Everything you see has its roots in the unseen world," and I imagine the barely seen expanses of the Universe, in which infinite mysteries must remain. He writes, "The Source is within you," something Nancy Ellen Abrams might agree with. Both neurological researcher Andrew Newberg, and the praying atheist Abrams, work hard to find concepts that bridge differences.

This congregation is like the city of Stockholm: it exists on many islands that make up the whole. Especially during this transitional period, may you work hard to build and maintain the bridges between you. May you forge connections; to speak and listen; to make yourself hear what is being said. Our wisdom emerges from the wisdom we have as individuals. Be gracious to each other and design graceful bridges between you.

Now is the time to know that all you do is sacred.

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