

Humankind's Relationship with God

Let's look at humankind's relationship with God. There are two fundamental ways to perceive our relationships with others — we can see others as objects, or we can see others as people. Martin Buber discussed this difference in what many consider the greatest theological book of the 20th century, *I and Thou*. More recently, the difference between seeing others as objects and seeing others as people is taught by the Aringer Institute in their seminal book, *The Anatomy of Peace*. The Aringer training has become an essential component of how I conduct ministry.⁸³

How we relate to others as an object or as a person also applies to our relationship with God. There are times when we wish to speak about God objectively. Then I use metaphysical language. However, when we want to speak of our relationship with God, we must use the language of *I and Thou*. That language is mysticism.

Much of this section will speak about Jesus Christ and my relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus was a mystic. I agree with much of traditional Christianity that Jesus experienced the full range of human emotions and thinking. And we share the belief that, at some point, he achieved full awareness of his

divine nature. This awareness of one's divine nature is what we know as the mystical experience, and we teach that all of Jesus' works and teachings were expressions of this awareness. Mysticism, or awareness of one's divine nature, was the religion of Jesus, and it summarizes my primary spiritual pathway.

Jesus is often referred to as the way-shower, he who shows the way. What is this way that Jesus taught and demonstrated? It is fundamentally an opening of the heart accompanied by a sense of oneness with God and all creation, a sense of gratitude and joy for all things that flow into one's life, and a willingness to manifest that which God wants to express through one's life.

Furthermore, I share with traditional Christianity an understanding of the critical importance of faith. We differ, however, in what faith does. For me, faith does not restore a connection to God nor change my status from lost to saved, for I am an expression of the divine idea of Christ, perfect and eternal, just as I am. I am never separate from God. Instead, faith opens up a channel in my soul for the reception of all good that God has prepared for me. In short, faith serves as a conduit for flow, not for oneness.

⁸³ TruthUnity Ministry Resources, Aringer Institute. <https://www.truthunity.net/organizations/aringer-institute>

10. Benevolent and Engaged or Distant and Benign?

The last section discussed our *understanding* of the nature of God. We now shift to how a metaphysical Christian might *experience* the nature of God.⁸⁴ To explore that topic, I will draw from a 2006 study and book, *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God — & What That Says About Us*⁸⁵. The study shows that how Americans answer two questions will place them into one of four groups, each representing about one-quarter of the population. The questions are: (1) Is God sometimes angry? And (2) Is God engaged in my life? This study reveals that half of Americans experience God as occasionally angry, and a half experience God as never angry. Further, half of Americans experience God as engaged in our daily affairs, and half experience God never interfering in our life.

The first question, *Is God sometimes angry?*, begins to define who will resonate with a metaphysical religious movement like Unity and metaphysical Christianity. I sense that most people in Unity and metaphysical Christianity do not experience God to be angry. This implies that about half of the American population

would be comfortable in a Unity setting where the ministry focused on an experience of God as never angry.

Four views of God from typical Americans.

However, the second question — *Is God engaged in my life?* — will likely not find any consensus in Unity nor the overall American population. To demonstrate the wide variety of views regarding how engaged God is in our life and world, I will present statements from four people talking about how God is engaged in their life. I believe they represent what we might find in a Unity church and the American population.

Three of these responses were from the 2006 study, while the other was taken from a particular source I will reveal later. Each is representative of how a typical Unity congregant might understand God. The responses are ranked according to how engaged they perceive God to be. Notice which statement resonates closest to you.

1. *God is directly active in the life and affairs of Peggy.* Peggy, and others like her, have fascinating stories of how God presents her with worldly gifts and responds to her prayers with money or some other direct assistance. Peggy, a mother of four who lives in rural Texas, writes, “He flushed my toilet once. I was living overseas, and I didn’t have a garbage disposal or a sink. My bathroom was where I would wash my dishes, and I had left some rice in a Tupperware container too long ... it got clogged in the toilet and it just sat there ... and so I just started to pray and as soon as I started to pray it just flushed.”

⁸⁴ *Bylaws, Branding and the Bifurcation of Unity Part 3.* <https://www.truthunity.net/the-human-side-of-unity/bylaws-branding-and-the-bifurcation-of-unity-part-3>

⁸⁵ Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods*. Oxford University Press 2010.

2. *God does not intervene in Chuck's affairs but speaks directly to him, providing Chuck with extraordinary guidance and supernatural knowledge.* People like Chuck emphatically declare that they "know God." He writes, "I talk and think to God, and he flashes his ideas into my mind. I am not deluded. I know his thoughts from the thoughts of men as they pass through the mental atmosphere. He also talks to me in certain dreams. I can distinguish these dreams from the other dreams. Repeated thinking about the presence of God makes him increasingly plainer to my inner vision."

3. *God's presence and activity are less direct for Tom, who believes that acts of God should be thought of as a metaphor for the effect of our church and friends on our lives.* Individuals like Tom tend to describe God as a "cosmic force." Tom, a middle-aged Presbyterian deacon, says, "Weekly worship is without question an act of God in my life [and are] evidence of his activity in my life. As far as any clearly miraculous events? Never." While Tom is a devoted church member, his belief is more abstract than that of Peggy or Chuck. Tom's God certainly does not flush toilets, nor does he speak directly to Tom, but God can be felt within the rituals of Tom's religious life, and in those moments of religious expression, God is real.

4. *God is not part of any particular religious tradition or ritual for Becca but rather the essence of "her divinity."* For Becca, an elderly schoolteacher from the Midwest, God is not a "man in the sky" but a more amorphous and mysterious reality that might be best described as nature. She says, "I feel God most vividly when I am close to nature. When I am sitting on the porch and hear the

birds singing and see the flowers and feel the wind, that is God's presence to me." While Becca is confident that this natural force called "God" pervades the universe, she is also convinced that God does not act on the universe as an independent or consciously calculating agent.

Is God benevolent and engaged or distant and benign?

These four people represent different points on a continuum of God's engagement in our lives and the world. God is directly engaged in a personal way in the lives of Peggy and Chuck, through events and affairs for Peggy and mental processes for Chuck. For Tom and Becca, God is not directly engaged in their lives in any personal way, although both Tom and Becca feel a presence of God through the community for Tom and through nature for Becca.

Think about Peggy. Peggy's testimony sounds very much like someone with a strong affinity for Unity's traditional prosperity teachings, a well-established Unity and New Thought teaching.

For Chuck, we can see an affinity for God engaging us in our mental process, which is also a foundational teaching of Unity and New Thought. Peggy's and Chuck's profiles are examples of those who experience God as highly engaged in individual human life. For them, God is "Father" or "Father-Mother" God. A God who is not judgmental but personally engaged in human life and is benevolent.

For Tom, God's engagement is indirect, through the experience of community — through the Oversoul or collective unconscious, or, as Charles Fillmore called it, through [human] race consciousness. God, as a "cosmic force," is not personal, and there is no way Tom would acknowledge God as anything other than Principle. God as Principle is undoubtedly part of the Unity and New Thought teaching. Becca is a true Transcendentalist, an honorable source of Unity spirituality, who understands God as divinity pervading all nature and humanity.

I doubt that Becca would be comfortable talking about God as a transcendent being at all. Instead, she would refer primarily to "my divinity," her source of power and strength. Tom's and Becca's profiles are examples of those who experience and understand God as not engaged in any personal way in human life. For them, God is Principle and "divinity." A God who is not judgmental but also not personally engaged in human life is benign and distant.

What did Charles Fillmore think?

Of the four people above, Peggy, Tom, and Becca were from the original study. The book profiled a fourth person, Fernando, whose testimony so closely matched that of Charles Fillmore that I decided to insert Fillmore's testimony as Chuck. You can read Mr. Fillmore's testimony in *The Household of Faith*, page 172. Here is more of what he is quoted as saying regarding God's engagement:

I can remember with what satisfaction I used to imbibe the assumed wisdom of freshmen teachers. I knew nothing about God because I had never made an effort to get acquainted with Him, and in my egotism, I said, "All these people that think they are in communion with God are deluded; I have never seen God. I believe in things you can see, and I will take the testimony of Bob Ingersoll, who says you cannot know God, rather than that of Henry Ward Beecher, who says you can."

But a time came when I decided to solve this question independent of any man's opinion. I set about to search for Him with my mind. And right here, I want to add my testimony good and strong with those who have said I know God. I talk and think to God, and He flashes His ideas into my mind. I am not deluded. I know His thoughts from the thoughts of men as they pass through the mental atmosphere. He also talks to me in certain dreams. I can distinguish these dreams from the other dreams. Repeated thinking about the presence of God makes Him increasingly plainer to my inner vision. I have thought about Him as the life of my body until every cell is a-thrill with an energy that I can feel as you feel the shock of an electric battery, and He tells me how to communicate this life to others who have not recognized it as I have. Don't let the fool say in your heart, "There is no God" (Psalms 14:1). I let that kind of fool talk in my heart and it set up a current of thought that kept me for years speechless in the presence of God.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ *The Household of Faith*, p172. <https://www.truthunity.net/books/the-household-of-faith-165-177#172>

I encourage you to click through to the source page on TruthUnity for this quotation and then to the Wikipedia links on Bob Ingersoll and Henry Ward Beecher because they give a fascinating insight into who influenced the thinking of Charles Fillmore. I am reading *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*. I am beginning to understand why Charles found Beecher's writings so helpful; I am assembling a profile page about Henry Ward Beecher on TruthUnity.⁸⁷ We don't have many references like these in the Fillmore writings, but the comparison of Ingersoll and the younger Beecher help us understand how Charles' beliefs were shaped.

I think that all four people represent Unity congregants but that Chuck (Charles Fillmore) is closest to what we would call metaphysical Christian.

To conclude this part of the insight, there is another reason for asserting that a metaphysical Christian would experience God as benevolent and engaged. Go back to Insight 1, *Three Tenets of Metaphysical Christianity*. Ask yourself which of these experiences of God best fit our first assertion, that we are born in bondedness, not sin. Is it possible to bond with a distant God?

The bifurcation of Unity.

I emphasize a distinction between the experience of Peggy and Chuck from that of Tom and Becca because the experience of God's engagement is a profound factor

⁸⁷ TruthUnity, Henry Ward Beecher profile. <https://www.truthunity.net/people/henry-ward-beecher>

in our religious experience. Our experience of God also profoundly shapes our political and cultural preferences, as I will discuss below.

Unity and New Thought people will fall evenly split between experiencing God as benevolent and engaged and experiencing God as benign and distant. The difference is so profound that I believe it is presently causing a bifurcation of the Unity movement that will likely split the movement over time. Why might that be?

The survey used by the researchers measured many factors besides a person's perception of God. It also measured demographic data such as age, gender, income, race, and political views, and it also measured religious data such as denominational affiliation and church attendance. The study found that perceptions of God's engagement in one's life relate to one's demographics and political views. One's view of God indicates one's views of politics and culture. This is important since our country is founded on accepting religious pluralism, and we are committed to the tolerance of other denominations, religions, and systems of belief.

But in the Introduction, the researchers raise concern that Americans may be suffering from "religious illiteracy." Summarizing the conclusion of another study,

In their book *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing show that we have segregated ourselves into enclaves of people who look like us, talk like us, and behave like us. The downside of this growing pattern of self-segregation is that we tend not to meet or interact

with many people who appear different from ourselves.
(p. 3)

What the researchers identify as the Big Sort is what I talk about in Insight 4: Solipsism. In our hyper-connected world, digital media has provided unimagined ways for us to become insulated in our private world of experience. We can change news by pressing a button on the channel changer. We can friend and unfriend people with a simple click of the mouse. Hitting closer to home, we can quickly enter and exit a Sunday church service by pressing the Leave Meeting button.

My solution is in Insight 5: We must release our judgments, particularly of those we perceive as having a lower standard of human consciousness. There is no room for spiritual elitism in a liberal democracy.

I am aware of the many comments and objections that are likely to arise from this insight. There are plenty of references in Unity literature to support everyone's point of view. Settling a theological point of view is not my goal and, in my opinion, the last thing we need to do right now. We should be concerned about what the authors of *America's Four Gods* say about understanding others.

The political and cultural bifurcation.

The 2006 study found that people who are atheists or who are not affiliated with a denomination (the "nones") are much more likely to perceive God as distant from their personal life (the distant God). Not surprisingly, it was also found that people who are "churched" (Catholics,

mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, and Black Protestants) are much more likely to perceive God as being personally engaged in their life.

Nones are almost all postmodern. Churched people may be postmodern, but many are traditional or modern in their belief system.

The real problem is that differences in how people experience the engagement of God carries over into political and cultural differences as well. So if the assessment by the authors of *America's Four Gods* is accurate — that we as a society have "segregated ourselves into enclaves" — then we ought to consider that Unity is most likely evenly split not only about our experience of God but also in our political and cultural beliefs. This has enormous implications for a denomination that wishes to take a stand on particular social justice issues. How might we avoid the political and cultural bifurcation in Unity? I will have more to say in Insight 23, *Seeing the Christ in Others*, and the *Conclusion*.

The theological bifurcation.

As I've said, we have two languages to talk about God, metaphysics, and mysticism. I believe those who use metaphysics must be much more tolerant of those who use the language of mysticism because, as we learned from Huston Smith in Insight 6, many spiritual elitists are intolerant of mystics.

A few years ago, I published on TruthUnity some older editions of *Metaphysics*, the manuscript we use in Unity

to teach metaphysics.⁸⁸ I wrote in the introduction that no one today claims or believes that God is an old, bearded man. But if God is not a person, God is also far more than a principle. God is a presence — and, according to Peggy and Chuck, an active presence at that, concerned about their life and well-being. God may not flush my toilet or shift items in my bank account, but God does move things around in my mind. That is grace. And God does so actively and lovingly.

Why is this important? Sometime later, I received an email from a TruthUnity visitor. She had read some of the older editions of *Metaphysics* and what she read contradicted what she was taught in Unity Metaphysics classes. She was confused. She wrote, “What I’ve been studying within Unity is how God does not have a personal relationship with us.” In a follow-up message, she explained, “I felt emptiness for a while like my personal/intimate connection to GOD was no longer there. That didn’t feel good to me, and so I shifted some of my perceptions to find a better balance.”

I get messages like this pretty regularly. They break my heart because of the unnecessary challenge to this woman’s faith and because Unity has never taught us *that God has no personal relationship with us*. If we can say anything about the teachings of Jesus, it is that our relationship with God is more than personal. It is intimate to the point of being existential.

⁸⁸ *How Unity has taught Metaphysics*. <https://www.truthunity.net/the-human-side-of-unity/how-unity-has-taught-metaphysics>

Somehow a change in language conveys that a personal/intimate connection to God is no longer possible. The Fillmores indeed taught that God *operates* according to principle. Still, they never denied that God is a transcendent presence nor that the immanent presence of God is personal, intimate, benevolent, and active.

So I go back to what many believe to be the central point in Martin Buber’s theological study of *I and Thou*: God is a Thou if and only if we have a relationship with God; otherwise, God is an object. We need enough tolerance to allow people to speak of their relationship with God.

What we need to do to avoid theological bifurcation.

Teachers who insist that “God is principle” might consider rephrasing their statement: “our *understanding* of God is that God *operates* as principle.” Anything less than that is an unwarranted misstatement of Unity teachings that unnecessarily drives people from Unity. I am sure of that.

Further, ministers and teachers who wish to demonstrate a higher call to professional courtesy ought to acknowledge that people in Unity experience God in diverse ways, including God as present and personally engaged in one’s life. They might also recognize that Unity has never repudiated grace transcending the law of cause and effect.⁸⁹ The fact is that metaphysical

⁸⁹ *The Grace of God — A Lenten Lecture by Ed Rabel*. <https://www.truthunity.net/people/ed-rabel-the-grace-of-god>

Christians see — and experience — things in diverse ways.

I believe advocates who insist on the absolutist view that *God is only principle* have “segregated into an enclave” of non-theistic religion, the persistent disparaging of traditional language as “embedded theology,” and a campaign to establish an orthodoxy of language in Unity.

If the conjecture is so, our national organizations should refrain from branding Unity to attract believers of the distant and benign God. Twelve years ago, we had a branding effort that explicitly favored those in Unity who were identified as “key constituencies.”⁹⁰ Fortunately, we are now much further along than we were twelve years ago in understanding what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean: We now know that since God has no key constituencies, we should not have them either.

⁹⁰ *Diversity, Branding and Worldview in Unity*. <https://www.truthunity.net/the-human-side-of-unity/diversity-branding-and-worldview-in-unity>

11. From Metaphysics to Mysticism

If metaphysics can be said to provide us with an understanding of God, then it can also be said that the purpose of metaphysics is to prepare us for an experience of God. We find that purpose in Emma Curtis Hopkins’ *High Mysticism* and its accompanying guide book, *Résumé: practice book for the twelve chapters in High mysticism*. We also find it in Emilie Cady’s seminal essay *Finding the Christ in Ourselves*.

In other words, there is a spiritual progression from metaphysics to mysticism, from understanding God to experiencing God. Many people will be attracted to metaphysics to understand how to improve their health or prosperity. This motive is known within metaphysical circles as “seeking the loaves and fishes.” Metaphysics will be helpful to them. But at some point, their spiritual development will call them to more than an understanding of health and prosperity. At that point, they will experience a shift to the mystical path.

How Emilie Cady shifts from metaphysics to mysticism.

To demonstrate how that can be, let me share ten “shifts” from metaphysics to mysticism that are subtly