

July 27, 2015

Featuring fresh takes and real-time analysis from
HuffPost's signature lineup of contributors

HOT ON THE BLOG

[Dr. James Hansen](#)[Robert Kuttner](#)[Jeffrey Sachs](#)[Dr. Peggy Drexler](#)**Jim Burklo**[Become a fan](#)Associate Dean of Religious Life, University of Southern
California

Who or What Is God?

Posted: 02/02/2015 3:14 pm EST | Updated: 04/01/2015 5:59 am EDT

As you may have noticed from my recent "musings", I've been spending a lot of [time with professed atheists](#) lately. In particular, this week I found myself engaged in a rich email dialogue with [Gretta Vosper](#), pastor of West Hills United, a congregation of the United Church of Canada. She describes herself as an atheist. Few openly atheist pastors of Christian churches are seen in the US, but there are many in Canada, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, including some who were part of this email exchange. The atheists on the email thread challenged us post-supernaturalist theists to give up God because the term is too associated with "guy-in-the-sky" theology.

These encounters have inspired me to consider again what I mean when I use the word God, and why I still feel the urge to use it.

A few years ago, I wrote a poem to this end: ["Musing on God"](#). It still speaks for me, but since writing it, and since these recent engaging discussions with atheists, I find I have more to add.

Jokingly, I have referred to myself as an ["agnatheist"](#) - someone who is not sure of the existence of atheists. How can you unbelieve in something that defies definition, I ask? When I talk about God, you are hearing poetry. And poetry is why I talk God-talk. Poetry evokes. Like God, poetry does not define and decide and determine and direct. God is a fuzzy word. God is a fuzzy God, for that matter. I don't know all that God is or all that the word God means: that's why I speak it and write it. The word God is not one to lose: it's one for the muse to use.

Poetry depends on the spiritual, living power of words. You can't do poetry, you can't enjoy poetry if you treat words as blank, lifeless, arbitrary mental place-holders for real, discrete things that exist in the world. If you think God is just a noise or an arbitrary set of marks on a page that is supposed to refer to a Guy in the Sky, well - it's no wonder you might go down the atheist road, if there is one. You look in the sky, there is no Guy, so you drop the word along with that to which it was supposed to refer.

But wait: the word God is potent and rich. It doesn't refer to something else. It is something else. It does something else.

The word God evokes highest aspirations. It suggests the whole, and what makes me whole. It delivers me into the rich darkness of mystery, the allure of the unknown. It provokes possibility. It aims beyond what I can explain. The word God invites me beyond what I can imagine. The word God hints at the personality of the universe. It touches me with all-surpassing Love. The word God invokes curiosity, creativity. My uncertainty about what the word God means spins me into a healthy, humbling disequilibrium. It leaves me giddy.

In the Bible, the word God has no clear, unequivocal referent. Is God a nationalistic, jealous deity? The essence of existence? A Godhead or council of supernatural beings? A giver of laws, a judge of deeds? A clumsy creator, an inept parent? A human named Jesus? Love itself? A careful reading of the Bible ought to be enough to bash away any remaining certainty about the meaning of the word God.

The great mystics of the world's religions made a habit of chanting or mentally repeating the word "God" or its equivalents over and over again as a form of prayerful contemplation. They understood that the word God doesn't refer to God: it is God. It's not a concept to be believed. As was true for them, God is in us, and we are in God, simply by invoking the word.

JIM BURKLO

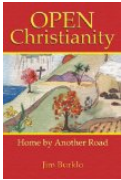
Website: [JIMBURKLO.COM](#) Weblog: [MUSINGS](#) Follow me on twitter: [@jtburklo](#)See a [video interview](#) about my new novel, [SOULJOURN](#)See the [GUIDE](#) to my articles and [books](#)[Associate Dean of Religious Life, University of Southern California](#)

Follow Jim Burklo on Twitter: www.twitter.com/jtburklo

MORE: [Atheism](#) [Christianity](#) [Theology](#)

This Blogger's Books and Other Items from...

amazon.com



Open Christianity:
Home by another Road
by Jim Burklo



Hitchhiking To Alaska:
The Way of Soulful
Service
by Jim Burklo

Huffington Post Search

[Advertise](#) | [Log In](#) | [Make HuffPost Your Home Page](#) | [RSS](#) | [Careers](#) | [FAQ](#)

[User Agreement](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Comment Policy](#) | [About Us](#) | [About Our Ads](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Copyright ©2015 TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. | "The Huffington Post" is a registered trademark of TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. All rights reserved.

Part of AOL Family