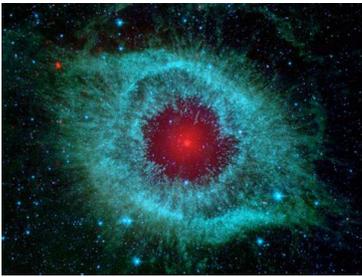


## The Three Faces of God

Brother David Steindl-Rast

Austrian-born Brother David Steindl-Rast has been a practicing Benedictine monk for over half a century and was one of the first Vatican-sanctioned delegates to participate in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. He is a recipient of the Martin Buber Award for his outstanding role in building bridges between religious traditions, and serves as a senior member of the Mount Savior Monastery in Elmira, New York.

Just as human beings intrinsically possess 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-person perspectives of the world, so do we possess those same perspectives in our experience of spirituality. And while these dimensions of the divine can be found in just about any spiritual lineage—Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Islam, etc.—many of these traditions only explicitly emphasize one or two of these perspectives, resulting in one or more important aspects of spirituality often being left out of their conceptions of God.



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### *Is Your God Big Enough?*

**God in 3rd-person** is often described as the "**great web-of-life**," and is frequently experienced when observing objects of **miraculous beauty** such as the **Grand Canyon, exquisite music, transcendent art, or the mind-boggling elegance of deep-space photography**. Many astronauts returning to Earth have experienced powerful states of transcendence triggered by simply looking at our planet floating in the vacuum of space, the sublime fragility and significance of the human condition clearly reflected in their retinas. As John Glenn said,

*"To look out at this kind of creation and not believe in God is to me impossible. It just strengthens my faith."*

Or, consider the words of another NASA hero, Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell:

*"On the way home from the moon, looking out at the heavens, this insight—which I now call a transcendent experience—happened. I realized that the molecules of my body had been created or prototyped in an ancient generation of stars—along with the molecules of the spacecraft and my partners and everything else we could see including the Earth out in front of us. Suddenly, it was all very personal. Those were my molecules. It was an experience of interconnectedness. It was an experience of bliss, of ecstasy... it was so profound. I realized that the story of ourselves as told by science—our cosmology, our religion—was incomplete and likely flawed. I recognized that the Newtonian idea of separate, independent, discreet things in the universe wasn't a fully accurate description."*



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### *Is Your God Close Enough?*

**God in 2nd-person** is traditionally defined as the "**I-Thou**" relationship with the divine, where Spirit is experienced as a **living intelligence that we can actually interact with in our own lives**. Borrowing from renowned theologian Martin Buber, in the "I-Thou" relationship, God is the hyphen connecting the I and the Thou. And of course, our conceptions of God in 2nd-person evolve right alongside the rest of humanity, growing from magical animistic immersion, to the mythic "old bearded white man in the sky" interpretation, to rational and

pluralistic recognitions of divinity within our families, communities, and humanity itself, to the simple intuition that we all exist within the unimaginable Mind of some Supreme Being, by whatever name. This is reflected beautifully in the closing lines of a love poem written by ee cummings, titled *i am so glad and very*:

*we are so both and oneful  
night cannot be so sky  
sky cannot be so sunful  
i am through you so i*

Or, from the lips of Beatle, George Harrison:

*It's been a long long long time  
How could I ever have lost you  
When I loved you  
It took a long long long time  
Now I'm so happy I found you  
How I love you  
So many tears I was searching  
So many tears I was wasting, oh oh  
Now I can see you, be you  
How can I ever misplace you  
How I want you  
Oh I love you  
Your know that I need you  
Ooh I love you*



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### ***Is Your God "You" Enough?***

**God in 1st-person** refers to the actual **phenomenological experience** of God, in the form of **satori, kensho, ecstatic reverie**, and other sorts of "**peak experiences**" of the divine. These are most frequently exercised through some form of contemplative practice, such as meditation or prayer, in which we can directly experience consciousness as the "singular to which the plural is unknown"—and the effortless, open awareness behind all of our experiences is recognized as the consciousness of God (or Godhead, as Christian mystics might

prefer). In this space, all of our thoughts, emotions, and experiences, as well as the rest of the world around us, are simply and effortlessly witnessed, in much the same way that clouds float effortlessly through the infinite expanse of the sky. And that effortless expanse at the center of each and every moment *is* God transcendent, looking at His/Her own immanence through each of our eyes. A wonderful description of this sort of personal experience *of and as* God can be found in Ken Wilber's book *One Taste*:

*"It is true that the physical matter of your body is inside the matter of the house, and the matter of the house is inside the matter of the universe. But you are not merely matter or physicality. You are also Consciousness as Such, of which matter is merely the outer skin. The ego adopts the viewpoint of matter, and therefore is constantly trapped by matter—trapped and tortured by the physics of pain. But pain, too, arises in your consciousness, and you can either be in pain, or find pain in you, so that you surround pain, are bigger than pain, transcend pain, as you rest in the vast expanse of pure Emptiness that you deeply and truly are.*

*So what do I see? If I contract as ego, it appears that I am confined in the body, which is confined in the house, which is confined in the large universe around it. But if I rest as Witness—the vast, open, empty consciousness—it becomes obvious that I am not in the body, the body is in me; I am not in this house, the house is in me; I m not in the universe, the universe is in me. All of them are arising in the vast, open, empty, pure, luminous Space of primordial Consciousness, right now and right now and forever right now. Therefore, be Consciousness."*

What is fascinating is that we can see that any spiritual tradition is capable of expressing all three of these forms of spiritual experience—in fact, if you are leaving any of these out, chances are your understanding of spiritual realities is incomplete in some way.

Historically, Western traditions can be said to have largely focused on 2nd- and 3rd-person interpretations, and have often been distrustful of 1st-person reports of God, using them, at times, as the grounds for heresy. On the other end of the pathology, Eastern traditions tend to emphasize 1st- and 3rd-person perspectives, and too often try to deny the existence of any sort of personal "God in 2nd-person." However, when moving from a **3rd-person description of God** directly to a **1st-person experience of God**, without the soul-cleansing qualities of **extreme humility, grace, and gratefulness that God in 2nd-person bestows upon us**, it can be deceptively easy to sneak the whims of the ego into our interpretations of spiritual experience—and, rather than transcending the ego, our spiritual experiences can ironically become the last refuge of the ego.

Strictly speaking, nothing can be said about the true essence of Reality (including that)—but in the finite, manifest domain, the three faces of God appear to be intrinsic to Spirit's radiant display. And unfortunately, Spirit's expression as 2nd-person Thou has largely gotten stuck at the mythic-membership fundamentalist level of development. The modern world not only rejected the marginalization and cruelties associated with the mythic god, it threw out God in 2nd-person altogether—and thus a huge baby got thrown out with the bathwater of mythic consciousness: one-third of God's own ever-present Face. Indeed, one of the key dilemmas for humanity is discovering a way to help the great spiritual and religious traditions grow into their modern, postmodern, and integral forms of being-in-the-world, with all three faces of God shining brightly.

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