

# THE GOD BEYOND HUMAN FRONTIERS

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## 1. Introduction

At the beginning of salvation history, when Abraham was chosen as God's agent of salvation, he was told: "And by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Genesis 12:3b). Jesus who came as the good shepherd seeking the lost sheep was often found in the 'bad' company of tax collectors and others, who were branded as sinners, not to share in their way of life, but to win them to the right path. And it happened that once as Jesus was in the house of Matthew the tax collector and his friends, the Pharisees who considered themselves to be the custodians of the Law wondered and asked the disciples of Jesus why, he being a teacher of the Law, ate with the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Matthew 9:12). In the First Testament we have the prophetic books of Jonah, Amos, Second Isaiah and Malachi which are revolutionary in the understanding of God's attitude toward the wicked and the other nations. In this essay we look at these books from these perspectives which are crucial in a world of multicultural and multi-religious dimensions.

## 2. The Book of Jonah

The book of Jonah differs from all the other prophetic writings as it is not a collection of prophetic sayings. In it we have only one single brief prophetic saying (3:4b): "Another forty days, and Nineveh shall be destroyed." The saying is only less than half a verse with five words in Hebrew. The Bible speaks about a Jonah, son of Amittai in 2 Kings 14:23-25 who was a prophet at the time of king Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.E.), from Gath-hepher, near Nazareth and who could have been a contemporary of Prophet Amos. His father was called Amittai which is related to the Hebrew root *emeth* meaning truthfulness or faithfulness and the name Jonah means "dove," which is a symbol of innocence. Does it also mean that Jonah was so naïve as to think of God falsely and stick to his thinking to the last moment? The book is full of ironies. It is of postexilic date as is evident in the vocabulary, the thematic contents and the historical context.

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The book gives the impression of esoteric and unusual events and phenomena which invite us to think what type of literature it could be and the conclusion is that it cannot be narrating what actually happened. We remember that historical figures are used as a basis for imaginative literature. Such imaginative parables and stories are capable of speaking the truth of God's word. Such is the use of Jonah in Matthew 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29-32 and it does not indicate that the book of Jonah is historical. Jesus may have referred to Jonah as a parable. The Good Samaritan is a good example as also the prodigal son. The book contains a series of improbable occurrences that, of course, God could have performed. The song of thanksgiving from the belly of the fish, animals fasting, and the instantaneous and complete conversion of Nineveh etc. are difficult to understand. We do not have any records for these. To combine all these events and understand them is quite an intellectual feat. Besides, we have an amazing psalm from the belly of a fish.<sup>1</sup> We do not have any historical hints here. Jonah here appears delightful and enigmatic. The book is one of intrigue and innocence, of anger, humour and fantasy. The ironic cast and exaggerations that pervade the book show that the author's intention goes beyond any simple reporting of events.<sup>2</sup> There is no necessary relationship between historical facticity and the truth of a narrative. The whole thrust of the book is on the struggle between God and Jonah bringing out the great truth that God is the Lord of all and that he chose the Jews and people like Jonah to be his agents of salvation. The book is a satirical and dialectic short story with a prophetic message for us all: divine mercy knows no bounds; it is extended to all nations and even to sinners.

The book is a didactic short novella written satirically to teach how God deals with sinners and even other nations who are presented as 'wicked.' In the book Jonah is made a caricature of a typical Jewish thinking at that time. Yahweh's forbearance with the foreign powers that oppressed Israel for centuries is evident here. His mercy knows no bounds. Jonah the Jew runs away from the mission given to him, which was to preach repentance to the 'wicked' Ninevites who caused so much suffering to his people and even destroyed the kingdom of Israel. Jonah ran away not because of unbelief or an absence of faith but because of a certain

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<sup>1</sup>D. J. Zucker, *Israel's Prophets*, New York: Baker Academic, 1967, 185.

<sup>2</sup>T. E. Frethheim, *The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977, 51ff. and E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, Sheffield: Almond, 1981, 39ff.

belief he had. The issue in the book is one between a man of faith and his God. Here is a theological conflict. And it led him to disobedience and finally to despair. He could not accept that God should be merciful to a ‘wicked’ foreign nation. Jonah is a divided man; he is in a theological conflict. The opening scene (1:1-3) makes it clear that the real subject of the story is Yahweh; for his word and his name begin and end the passage. The tension between Yahweh and Jonah emerges as the main theme; but motifs that drive it forward are to be found in Jonah’s relations to Nineveh and to the ship’s crew as well. Jonah is a religious begot on whom Yahweh has a claim; Nineveh is a pattern, an example of the wicked world. Tarshish stands for remoteness from God.

The second scene is in a ship in the high seas and the sailors are the new actors. Yahweh intervenes against the fleeing Jonah. Jonah admits that he was guilty and that the violent storm in the sea was caused by him and that the only solution was to throw him out into the sea, but he did not repent. Still God was merciful and saved him through the fish. The adherents of foreign religions submit to what Yahweh does, while Jonah the Jew does not. In these first two scenes satire is the prevailing comic mood. Jonah was sleeping while the sailors were anxiously awake. They pray; he thinks he can escape from Yahweh. However, he confessed that he was disobeying and fleeing away from God, which shocked the sailors who followed another religion.

Something grotesque or bizarre dominates the third scene, which begins with (2:2-11) where we have an imploring complaint, which is seen as an interpolation by many. In this third scene (3:1-10) the narrator speaks more about the Yahweh than Jonah; Yahweh is the first and last word here. Yahweh leads Jonah to Nineveh. The one who wanted to escape (1:3) is brought back by a great fish (2:10). In the fourth scene even animals mourn and fast; the scene is bounded and determined by events in Nineveh. This scene shows the theological location and provenance of the narrator. Here the use of the word ‘God’ than ‘Yahweh’ is noteworthy as it points to the situation of Nineveh. With 3:10 we have an abrupt change of scene. After a short absence at 3:4, Jonah now comes as the sole partner to whom God talks and negotiates. And Nineveh is the subject of the conversation in this final scene (4:1-11). Here the Lord’s question and Jonah’s answer define the problem. “The way in which Jonah deals with Israel’s experience of Yahweh’s mercy is frightening and chilling.”<sup>3</sup> For him this confession of

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<sup>3</sup>H. W. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, trans., M. Kohl, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, 176.

faith, with its consequences for hostile Gentile world, completely calls in question Israel's belief and her ministry in the world. The narrator makes Jonah the spokesman of the sullen murmuring among "the God-fearing" of the postexilic era, who found it pointless to go on serving God and useless to inquire about his commandments (Malachi 3:14ff.) since – in the face of the happiness of the wicked – it seemed vain to ask: "Where is the God of judgment?" (Malachi 2:17).<sup>4</sup> Jonah was looking forward to the 'well-deserved fall' of Nineveh (4:5). But the contrary happened and divine justice seemed to be absent. Here the narrator has a mock theological battle. Jonah's need for self-assertion clutches at a rigid theology and makes it impossible for him to follow the divine modulations and transformations.<sup>5</sup> Now God wants to pluck Jonah out of his self-willed malignancy at all costs (4:6). What he said in Nineveh is more important to him than what God thereby brought about. For this God urges questions upon him to stimulate his own self-critical reflection, to move him to test his own reluctance (4:4,9a) and to compare his own justice with that of God (4:10ff.). In his demands Jonah behaves as if he were finished with God, But not Yahweh; he shows him the same kindness shown to the Ninevites; God does not take his spitefulness too seriously. God is guiding him to an understanding of completely free grace. The helplessness of the city was reason enough for compassion (4:11).

Jonah's problem was the indiscriminate extension of divine mercy to the wicked. In his reading and perception God is much too free and generous with his mercy in his dealings; God should be stricter. But Israel was to place herself at the service of others in extending the message of God's word and mercy. Here the centripetal understanding of Israel's role in history is turned centrifugal. While Israel is people of God, the people of God are broader than Israel.<sup>6</sup> God's mercy is available to all and is not subject in its application to careful calculations according to the human understanding and preferences. The book of Jonah calls forth a response from God's people challenging them to a new understanding of the breadth and depth of divine mercy and providential care, as well as a new perception of what this means with regard to their responsibility in the world. The book is for the Jews and about them. Jonah is a type of the author's readers. He is never identified as a prophet in the book. Jonah is

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<sup>4</sup>Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 176.

<sup>5</sup>J. K. Kuntz, *The People of Ancient Israel*, New York: Harper & Row, 1974, 487.

<sup>6</sup>T. E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977, 22-26.

pious and prays to God (2:2; 4:2). He is not dishonest or hypocritical, but forthright; he lets God know what exactly he feels and thinks. Evidently, he is a disobedient believer who remains stubborn and dogmatic regarding the position he has taken. He was open to the sailors but not to the Ninevites. He did not want to preach to the latter and when he did, it was with much reluctance. His reluctance and anger may not have been because they were foreigners, but wicked (1:2). Jonah sees God as being too merciful and lenient to the guilty. It appeared that God did not relate his response in ways that conformed to the canons of fairness and justice. The arrogant are blessed. The mindset of Jonah is reflected in the words of prophet Malachi: “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them; where is the God of justice?” (2:17). The author of Jonah questions this narrow religio-national attitude of his contemporaries. Some people tended to exalt the place of Israel in God’s future at the expense of all the other nations of the world. God has been more just with Israel in the past and so Israel should understand God’s dealings with the Ninevites more clearly than she has. God relates with people in ways that go beyond any simple system of logic or justice.

Commenting on the story of Jonah, St. Ephrem the poet theologian of the fourth century wrote:

Election, therefore, is not (a matter) of names.  
 The furnace of testing the name is the deed.  
 It is tested whether it is the true name.  
 For there is fruit that is very splendid  
 But its taste is opposite of beauty.  
 Even the despicability of the bee,  
 The most despised of all, is a spring of sweetness.  
 Splendid names – the house of the Hebrews –  
 Are sweet names that make bitter things flow.  
 The mention of their name is sweet to the ear.  
 The taste of their fruit ravages your mouth (44.7-14)  
 Instead of their bodies they circumcised their hearts’ (49.6b).<sup>7</sup>

### 3. The God of Second Isaiah

Two hundred years after Isaiah of Jerusalem in the eighth century B.C.E., we have an anonymous prophet whom we call Second Isaiah who

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<sup>7</sup>Kathleen F. Mc Vey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on the Nativity, Hymns against Julian, Hymns on Virginity and on the Symbols of the Lord*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989.

preached in similar tones in Babylon where the Israelite people were exiles (47:6; 48:14) till the sixth century, when Cyrus became internationally known (44:28 and 45:1) and is presented as the Lord's 'shepherd'. He issued an edict permitting the Jewish exiles to return home. While Jeremiah saw the new Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar as agents of Yahweh's judgment, Second Isaiah saw, Cyrus as an agent of restoration.

The People who were in Babylon for two generations and had entered into public life and made some economic gains and cultural achievements resisted the home-going movement (45:9-13). For Second Isaiah, Babylon that looked so benign was a place of exile, and in exile they were deported, displaced and transplanted. He directed his words against those who denied that the Lord made use of Cyrus for their liberation (45: 1-13) and those who doubted the power of God (50:2) and his fidelity (49:14). They suffered from a severe forgetfulness (*amnesia*) and disregarded their traditions.

God acts through King Cyrus who was an enlightened ruler who sought the good will of subjected peoples. He was king of Anshan and a vassal of Median from about 550. After a successful rebellion he gained control of the Median Empire and founded the Archaemenid dynasty. In 539 he took the Babylonian empire. The new Persian Empire respected their religious sensibilities and gave them cultic autonomy. In 538 BCE, the first year of his reign, Cyrus authorised the return of Jews to their homeland, providing funds for rebuilding the temple (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:3-5). Announcements about Cyrus is found in the pair sayings (Is 44:24-28 and 45:1-7) and in the following disputation (45:9-13). Indeed, Cyrus was making history. He was serving the purpose of God in history. He was one who did not feel threatened by cultural pluralism. He promulgated a decree in an oral pronouncement that permitted the renewal of Jewish community in Palestine. The edict is given in the Hebrew version at Ezra (1:2-4) and in the Aramaic version at Ezra (6:3-5). Cyrus was an instrument of divine will (44:28; 45:1).

Second Isaiah invites the people to a homecoming (49:9-13). He initiated dreams of homecoming and begins to subvert oppressive social institutions and presuppositions of the day. Here is a liberated and liberating speech. We are appreciated and paid by people, but we fail to sense our exile and resist discerning it; we do not yearn for a homecoming because we fooled ourselves into thinking the present arrangement as our home. To accommodate to such a social reality, our language is made prosaic and didactic, helps to keep a lid on things. Our language remains

descriptive, better to tell what is than to trust in what will be.

... [F]or the empire insists that particularistic communities forget their particular rootage for the sake of universal myths. The particulars are such an embarrassment to the regime. People who believe in the universal myths are easier to administer, for then we are all alike and indeed we are really replaceable parts. It is not different among us. When we have completely forgotten our past, we will absolutise the present and we will be like contended cows in Bashan who want nothing than the best of today. People like that can never remember who they are, cannot remember their status as exiles or that home somewhere else. It takes a powerful articulation of memory to maintain a sense of identity in the midst of exile.<sup>8</sup>

To the astonishment of the people the new Exodus is ordered by Cyrus, a ‘pagan’ king. It is remarkable that the Lord God makes King Cyrus the Persian his agent for the liberation of the Israelites from the Babylonian exile. Cyrus had conquered Babylon peacefully and the people welcomed him.<sup>9</sup> Second Isaiah presents him as the Lord’s shepherd to take care of God’s people (Isaiah 44:28). A shepherd is one who leads, feeds and protects the sheep or a people. He is also declared to be the Lord’s anointed, *Messiah*, whose right hand he has grasped (Isaiah 45:1a). Here is a title given to the high priests (Leviticus 4 & 6) or to the Israelite kings (1 Samuel 24:26; 2 Samuel 1). All the more it was even the term given to the expected deliverer. Of course, anointing meant being set apart for a special mission. However, that a foreign king who did not know or recognize the Lord (Isaiah 45:4-5; 46:12-15), though the Lord did both, is given such a title was startling. As in Jonah it points to the fact that the Lord is the Lord of the universe, all belong to him and all are under his governance and there is no other God or Lord: “that men may know, from the rising of the Sun and from the west that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:6). Ultimately all faith and worship are directed to the only one God who can choose anyone as his agent of human salvation implies that the divine economy goes beyond all national and religious barriers.

Isaiah 19:24-25 is an astounding statement in which Israel is presented as a third mediator of blessing on earth, after the Egyptians and the Assyrians: “On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria,

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<sup>8</sup>W. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Voices in Exile*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, 102.

<sup>9</sup>J. K. Kuntz, *The People of Ancient Israel*, New York: Harper & Row, 1974, 397.

a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.” Of course, Israel is said to be the ‘heritage of the Lord.’

#### 4. Amos and the God without Frontiers

The God of prophet Amos is the God of the universe in which Israel has a special role which made it also the target of special indictment (4:6-12; 5:18-20). Israel belonged to the Lord, but he did not belong to them as they thought. The oracles against the nations climatically turn to Israel (1:3-2-16). The Lord’s reign goes beyond ethnicity and race; He is beyond the confines of Israel. An important demand of Amos was that one’s religion and daily life must be in symphony; one’s relationship to God was determined also by one’s relationship to other human beings.

We have a very pertinent statement of the prophet at 9:7-8. “There is no other text quite like it in the entire Old Testament; compared to the unusual statements about Israel’s relation to Yahweh it is radical and perplexing. Israel is like the Cushites to Yahweh, and the Exodus is ranged along with migration of other peoples.”<sup>10</sup> In the rhetorical questions, Amos mentions first the Cushites who were a distant people known as slaves. Then the greatest event in Israelite history, the Exodus, is relativised and compared to migrations of other peoples like the Philistines, and Arameans who were cause of tremendous trouble for the Israelites; these were nations dreaded and hated. The people are to realize that the God of Israel is the God of all the nations and human history is guided and led by him.<sup>11</sup> Israel falsely understood that her unique role as chosen meant preferential status and privilege.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, she was chosen for others and had the role of a servant. Israel even celebrated the Day of the Lord as one of victory for them and doom for their enemies. Amos reversed the idea and spoke of it as one of darkness and not light: “Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why should you long for that day? It is a day of darkness, not of light” (5:18). Israel was chosen for others and therefore the choice was not exclusive but inclusive. “To be called into the service of the God of Israel

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<sup>10</sup>J. L. Mays, *Amos*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969, 156; H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974, 106.

<sup>11</sup>A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*, New York, London: Harper Torch Books, 1969, 33; J. W. Miller, *Meeting the Prophets*, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, 58-59.

<sup>12</sup>J. K. West, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Macmillan, 1981, 301.



is not a paying position, not like a lucrative business venture. It costs the messenger a great deal in every respect. But it is a word of this kind, more than any other, which continues to be heard through the millennia as God’s word.”<sup>13</sup> God had chosen Israel as his people, but they ignored its implications. People took election for a privilege and did not accept their responsibility. The choice of Israel was not that the world may serve it, but that Israel should serve it. One has to seek God to meet him in life and history where he manifests himself; seek him by seeking good and righteousness in everyday life (Amos 5:6, 14-15).

Yahweh was no national deity whose domain was limited by the boundaries and interests of a single people. Although Israel was exclusively his, it was a tragic mistake for the people of Israel to assume that Yahweh belonged exclusively to them. God’s being and his purpose are never conterminous with any nation or people, even though he might use one nation through whom his purpose for all should be manifested.<sup>14</sup>

### **5. Prophet Malachi and His God Whom All Honour**

Malachi speaks against the priests who offered blind, lame and sick animals in sacrifice to the Lord. He felt it better to close the temple. The other nations are better in the matter (1:11). Some see in 1:2-5 a particularism that is against a broader understanding and so take it as a later addition. According to some it is a misunderstanding to contrast the universalistic with the particularistic view here. There are different interpretations about 1:11. Once Catholics saw here the ‘pure offering’ as referring to the Eucharist as the Council of Trent did (DB 1742). This thinking arose on the basis of the word *minchah* which designated offering of meal in the priestly ritual. About this J. Swetnam wrote:

Catholic commentators have frequently understood the text as a reference to the sacrifice of the Mass. Whatever may be said about this interpretation from the standpoint of Christian exegesis of the Old Testament (and the present writer suspects quite a bit can be said) this interpretation could hardly have been the original one at the time the text was written.<sup>15</sup>

The author seems to think that it refers to the Diaspora as understood by Midrash Rabbah 13:4. Some see it as pointing to a syncretic worship of the

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<sup>13</sup>W. H. Wolff, *Confrontations with Prophets*, New York: Fortress Press, 1983, 25.

<sup>14</sup>C. G. Howie, “Expressly for Our Time: Theology of Amos,” *Interpretation* 13 (1959), 275.

<sup>15</sup>*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 31 (1969), 203.

high God in all religions. But many feel that Yahweh would not allow such heathen worship. Some others think that the prophet is saying that the heathen worship is acceptable to the Lord. The sacrifices that the heathen tender their gods are purer in his sight than the polluted offerings in Jerusalem (1:11). This is of course an instance of religious liberalism unparalleled in the Old Testament. Heathen worship though offered in ignorance of the name of the Lord is acceptable to him. The phrase “from the rising of the sun to its setting” in the light of Psalm 50:1; 113:3; Isaiah 45:6 could be seen as eschatological.

In our view, the vision in 1:11 is a high point of messianism and universalism. One could even say that whatever one offers to God in his own way, even in a wrong way, ultimately goes to the only God and is acceptable. People use different symbols for God as a tree, sun, moon, etc., but these are only symbols for the ineffable God. When it is done in good conscience, it must be seen as valid and acceptable to God.

At Malachi 1:1-6, there is the divine indicative of love with the demand for a life according to the *Torah* of the Lord. The Israelite priests despised the divine name by offering unclean and unworthy sacrifices. It lead even to the idea of closing such a temple (1:10).<sup>16</sup> Verse 11 opens with an emphatic ‘ki’ (‘for’) with the causal meaning: “For, from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is great among the nations, and everywhere incense is offered to my name as well as a pure offering.” The Lord is not tied down to the sacrifices of Jerusalem, and to the great surprise of the local priests and the covenant people, it is said that the Lord is honoured beyond the confines of the Jewish boundaries.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Our picture of God can make us more generous, open, and empathetic or even rigorous, narrow minded and fanatic. Humans think of God in their own limited ways. Truly God is beyond all human imaginations, comprehensions as well as limitations; God revealed himself to Moses as “I am who I am,” (Exodus 3:14) which could be understood as he who is existence itself or more plainly as one who is ever with his people; here God’s name is rather elusive. God cannot be defined; or even pinned down to a name; he is beyond any name, his name is simply, *Adonai* (Lord), or

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<sup>16</sup>G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, New York: Grand Rapids, 1943, 647.

<sup>17</sup>However, E. Achtmeier sees no reference to heathen or Diaspora at vv. 6 and 14; see *Nahum-Malachi*, Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986, 177.

*SHEM* (NAME); the only description fit to our understanding of him is that he is LOVE in its purest sense. There can be only one God whom we call Elohim, Alla, or Parameshwar who is believed in and worshiped by all. This Lord God is great and honoured among the nations (Malachi 1:5, 11, 14). The God of Jonah loves even the ‘wicked’ Ninevites to whom his mercy is open; the God of Second Isaiah makes even ‘pagan’ kings his agent of salvation; the God of Malachi accepts any offering that is made by sincere hearts even if one inaccurately; because what God sees the heart and not the thing offered. Should then, believers fight and kill each other in the name of God and religion?

Some Indian theologians have been saying, ‘being religious today means to be interreligious,’ which is not to be taken in a syncretic sense that may lead to a kind of religious indifferentism. Religions are different ways to God and a healthy and mature understanding would be that each one tries to understand and live his/her religion while being appreciative and open to and ready to communicate with and learn from those of others and even be free to embrace the way that one finds more convincing and acceptable. If I share my knowledge of Jesus with others that is because he is so fascinating to me that I cannot be silent about him. I know that any person of good-will is under divine guidance and protection and that his concern for humanity can never be exclusive, but ever inclusive. One should be completely free to choose his/her religion remembering that God and his salvific action cannot be confined to any nation, religion or culture. One should not think to be free to impose one’s religion or religious practices on anybody else; it is to be a matter of perfect freedom. The insight given by the *Rgveda* on the matter is fascinating and challenging to every seeker of truth: “*Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanthi*, The Being is One, the sages call by many names.”<sup>18</sup> We may also remember the Islamic Creed: “*Allah hu Akbar*, God is greater.” Indeed God is greater than any Scripture or religion.

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<sup>18</sup>*Rgveda* 1.164.46.