

## **'Talking with God: Initial comments'**

Méli Solomon

### **Project description**

'Talking with God' is an interview-based project, where I speak with Jews, Christians and Muslims who are observant in some way. The aim is to develop a rich portrait of how people live their faith, especially their relationship with God. My vision for this project is to interview upwards of 100 people and share the resulting analysis and conclusions with the public via a book, workshops and other projects. I am making a point of speaking with ordinary people, so as to get at how practice is actually fitting into and enriching people's lives when they work as teachers, managers, doctors etc.

My approach to the interviews is open and inquisitive, and I have no thesis to prove or disprove. As a result, my coaching techniques of active listening and open questions are used, to elicit a more nuanced picture. While I am not attempting to produce an exhaustive study, I am taking every opportunity to speak with a balanced range among the three Abrahamic faiths and their sub-groups. Thus far, my networked method has unearthed a healthy variety of people in 18 cities and 7 countries. All the interviewees have found the conversation engaging and helpful, if difficult at times. It is an unusual experience and since I'm asking questions no one has asked before, people are pressed to consider aspects of their observance for the first time.

My 'Talking with God' interviews grew out of my own evolving religious practice, and questions about the nature of my relationship with God and the purpose of prayer. However much I tried, I was not able to answer my own questions and was curious about whether others were having a similar experience. Reaching out to others who are observant complemented my engagement in inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue and learning with colleagues and clients.

At this point, I have interviewed 25% of my target total. Given the scale and scope of information collected, this article necessarily addresses a small portion of the project, but I can draw some initial and limited observations. Specifically, I focus here on the sense of God and the nature of the prayer experience. If I had to use only two words to describe what I have heard during 20-plus hours of interviews, they would be varied and fascinating.

"Jede hat einen eigenen Gott – ist der andere ähnlich zu meiner?" (Each has one's own God – is the other similar to mine?) Such was Beth's provocative query. As a convert to Judaism from Christianity, it expresses a thoughtful perspective.

### **Sense of God**

While there is a range of images of God, the dominant sense is a fairly amorphous being, and definitely without physical form or gender. As Nancy, a nominally Christian woman said: "To believe in this father who is sitting up there. This I find a little odd." Even if God's identity isn't something they've given much thought to, the concept was sensory for all faiths, whereby people spoke of God being the original breath of life, or something they see, hear or feel. One Jew described God as a 'Gefühl' (feeling). For others, God is a palpable presence with force and energy, something dynamic, a form of the verb 'to be' providing an undercurrent to everything, and 'everything that was, that is, and that ever will be'. Carolyn, a Jew who's taken a rather alternative path, said: "There's nothing without God, although God is the no-thing". One Muslim made a similar statement – that God has limitless power and is able to do anything, is Noor (light) from within and not from any object. He

also noted that if no one has seen God, how can we describe him? And yet, for one of the older engaged Christians, Elisabeth, “God is the spirit of love.” In all of these, there’s a commonality of God being everywhere, throughout time, yet not something we can specifically identify. On the other hand, the shortest and clearest answer came from a Jewish professor, when he said: “I have no idea.”

While Christians and Muslims have representations of God, they did not describe God in human form or with gender. Ellen, a devout Christian, noted that the Holy Trinity is one as a spirit and never totally separate. God is superior but also has given her a platform to operate on. Similarly, another Christian, described herself as a channel for His love, adding: “God, through Christ, is very real.”

In asking about where this amorphous but felt energy showed up, several mentioned nature, noting the extraordinary beauty of sunsets, for example. Both Jews and Christians mentioned God being in community, in the relationships between people. A physician cited this in relating a difficult story of a patient dying but the daughter not being ready to let her mother go. As a religious physician, she had a sense that God was part of the dynamic at play between the dying mother, the clinging daughter and herself as the doctor providing care.

When asked about their sense of God and then their prayer practice, interviewees experienced a blockage or confusion when we tried to pin down what was happening and with what or whom they were communicating. This was intriguing to me, as it reflected my own experience and the impetus for this project. Describing the sense of God was better left vague. Some were comfortable with the grey zone either because they don’t “analyze exactly what God is”, as a Quaker noted, or because they have considered it and come to a place of comfort with not knowing. This was more an issue for Jews than others. One Jew, Anne, was more conflicted and unsettled, not just about who God is, but also the purpose of prayer and how the elements of religious observance fit into contemporary life. She feels that history is just stories and therefore doesn’t relate to or have influence on contemporary life, and yet she finds the traditions and rituals comforting.

### **Prayer Practice**

So what is happening when people pray? In describing their experience, structured prayer in service was nearly always the situation outlined. As with other aspects, there was a range of perceptions, including feeling connected to God and the community, feeling at peace, and being a channel for God’s love. A few described the opening of the heart. Sharon noted that although no one hears her prayers, she feels energy in her body, and a sense of floating and a connection to nature. Harold echoed this with stronger words, saying: “When davening [the Yiddish word for praying] works for me, it feels like pouring my heart out in a way that’s sustaining, and there’s some sense of really making contact, though the nature of the item on the other end is very obscure.”

People often described solitary prayer as being a conversation, maybe in their head, and always alone. The natural follow-up question was about how they address God. Although all three religions have multiple names for God, the Christians mentioned the greatest number used, such as Savior, Jesus, Lord God, Lord, Creator, Lord of Love, Goddess, dear God, and the Universe. I was particularly taken with a Quaker’s use of ‘Hi God’. It was much more intimate and familiar, like she was chatting with a good friend. A Protestant described a multi-path way, alternating between addressing the Holy Trinity as one, and one of it’s parts – the Holy Spirit guides, Jesus she relates to as a person and the Father is more superior.

Prayer, of course, is carried on within the scope of a relationship, whatever our sense of our partner may be. Bruce, a ‘modified’ Catholic, mentioned the need to meet God half way, and Robin, a Jew, noted: “I don’t

think God gives us things. I think God gives us the wherewithal to figure it out.” Lastly, Ahmed, a Sunni Muslim, asks for guidance but believes we need to take an active role, which is why God gave us abilities. In the end, these are rather similar statements.

For many, the overriding value or result of prayer and attending services was ‘comfort’. That word came up repeatedly, and several spoke of the vital importance of their relationship with God and their ability to connect to God through prayer. Interestingly, I heard this more from older women, both Jewish and Christian, than others. A Christian, Elisabeth, said: “I can’t think about my life without being incredibly grateful for God’s guidance. I don’t think I could have gotten through life’s experiences without God’s presence in my life”. Beth (Jewish) noted that “Menschen werden mich verlassen, aber Gott wird immer bei mir sein. Das ist meines größtes Trost.” (People will leave me, but God will always be by me. That is my greatest comfort.) Middle-aged and younger interviewees often described how pleasing and calming services were, without the sense of dependency of the women just quoted. This reflected their lighter level of observance and engagement. This makes sense, and follows the theory of ‘the more you put in, the more you get out’, though it’s not a perfect correlate.

The goal for most requests was to get support or direction – to be more patient with a difficult brother, or get a sign about whether to take on a daunting job – and more generally for health, well-being, compassion, fortitude and the like. So far, petitioning for more prosaic physical things is in the minority. Ellen ‘prays in numbers’, asking for specific things like a certain car or number of clients. One person mentioned praying for parking spaces in particular as a small request, while others mentioned this same item as a particularly silly thing to pray for. Taking a broader approach, one Muslim asks for help with anything he needs, including getting jobs and moving to a new city.

These requests met with equally varied results. Some saw concrete results, some were unsure there was a connection between request and changes in their lives, some didn’t really care, as the act of praying made them feel better regardless of outcome, and yet others hedged their bets, figuring that the prayer couldn’t hurt, and it might just help.

## **Conclusion**

I am pleased that the interviewees have found the conversations as engaging as I have, and look forward to continuing to expand my knowledge of people’s practices and relationship with God. It’s been encouraging also to see the issues come into my coaching, in that I’m now supporting clients not only to found or improve a business, but also to look at how integrated their values and faith practice is in their work lives. This angle is new. Assisting greater integration and congruity, or reflection on how the elements in life fit together is a unique and rewarding coaching conversation.

I am actively seeking Christians and Muslims who would like to join this project. If you or someone you know might be interested in participating or joining the mailing list, please contact me. I can be reached at [meli.solomon@gmail.com](mailto:meli.solomon@gmail.com).

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Published in the INTA Forum (German version ‘*Sprechen mit Gott: Projekt Beschreibung*’)  
Spring 2015