

# Why God Is Not Like An Elephant

by Glen Ebisch

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There is a familiar story, probably originating with the Jains in India, about the four blind men and the elephant. As you may recall, each seizes on a particular part of the elephant and proclaims it to be the entire truth about the animal. The first blind man grabs the tail and declares that an elephant is like a rope. The second touches its side and says that the creature is like a wall. The next encounters the trunk and believes an elephant is like a snake. And the fourth blind man touches the elephant's leg and says that it is like a tree.

The parallel usually drawn from this story is that the blind men are like the world's religions—each has a small part of the truth about God, yet each believes their own description to be correct and all inclusive. The moral to be taken away is that a wise man will be tolerant enough to take the best elements from each of these belief systems and thus arrive at an accurate picture of God. This is a lesson that I think is accepted by many people of liberal religious beliefs and perhaps by some of those religious humanists that Brian Eslinger has described as leaning heavily on the historical development of religious traditions.<sup>1</sup>

One problem with relying on the analogy between the elephant and God is that the story of the blind men is told from the perspective of someone with sight. Those of us with normal vision when placed in a room with an elephant are able to give a complete and accurate description of the creature. The empirical evidence is compelling. However, such is not the case with God. As far as we can tell, no one among us has the special vision needed to accurately describe God. We are all like the blind men, and no one is in a privileged position from which to warn others when their descriptions remain partial or have gone astray. There is no way for us to know what parts of each religion are accurate and which should be dismissed as being misguided.<sup>2</sup>

A second and more serious difference is based on the fact that neither the sighted observer nor the blind men are ever in doubt as to the existence of this thing that they are more or less experiencing. All the participants in this experiment are certain that there is indeed something out there because elephants, unlike God, manifest themselves in easily perceptible ways. Faith, specialized knowledge, or a particular way of interpreting human experience is not necessary to be certain that the elephant exists as an object of experience. Such, however, is not the case with God. This is why theologians and philosophers have spent so much time attempting to prove

God's existence or, in the absence of proof, urging people to believe based on faith, while the existence of elephants has remained relatively unproblematic.

Does the analogy between God and elephants, therefore, turn out to be so tenuous as to make the story useless? If one sees religion as offering descriptive statements about God, then I think that it does. However, if one sees religions as offering goals, values, and interpretations of the purpose of human life, then the parallel may still be valuable. Perhaps the story of the blind men is actually telling us that by taking something from each religion, we can flesh out a fuller understanding of what it is to be human; and this will allow us to develop ways of life that are more satisfying than can be had by following the single account of life offered by any one religion.

Of course, this comes very close to suggesting that religions are fictions that may direct human energies in more or less positive ways by creating symbols that capture our emotions, even though at their core they are not based on verifiable statements. If this is accurate, then instead of being like an elephant, God may turn out to be more in the nature of a mythological creature that embodies some central human concepts that engage our passions. Perhaps, then, we may conclude, that rather than being like an elephant, God is actually more like a unicorn: an image filled with meaning that inspires us because it transcends our experience.

## *Notes*

1. Brian Eslinger, "Humanist Elevator Speeches," *Journal of Religious Humanism*, xxxvi, Washington, DC, HUHumanists, 2003, p. 9.  
A philosophically sophisticated but similar approach is taken by John Hick in *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.
2. A point that I first saw made in William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, Stamford, Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2000.