

## **Asking the clergy: Is God's power bigger than the whole of any religion?**

By **JIM MERRITT**. Special to Newsday

Updated May 23, 2015 9:50 AM

Long Island's diverse religious communities offer divergent views of the almighty, but they generally agree on one thing: God is all-powerful. This week's clergy discuss how they attempt to understand and serve an ultimately unknowable supreme being.

### **Rabbi Anchelle Perl, Congregation Beth Sholom Chabad of Mineola:**

The simple answer is yes. But that godly power also depends on how you see your religion. If religion is to simply offer us salvation, enlightenment, a place in heaven, self-improvement, devotion, patience or even faith, then religion can be its own worst enemy. Because all of the above can be self-serving and narcissistic. God has the ultimate power to give us commandments that are dear to him and essential to his vast eternal plan. When observing a good deed, a mitzvah, we are doing something for him, something he desires infinitely, that affects him eternally. God created us for this mission. The real power of God is when we serve him instead of seeking to be served by him. The opportunity to serve provides an escape from narcissism by taking us beyond ourselves. The objective now focuses on the deed rather than on the person. My own goodness and righteousness is not the issue. Even when I'm not all good I can do that which is truly good. That gratitude for this opportunity brings real joy to life. This is ultimately the power of God, reflected in that every human being can bridge this finite world with this infinite godly power and opportunity. In Judaism it's always been a God-first way of life. We follow his commandments not because of a passion for rules and regulations, but out of love and awe for/of him. It's all about God. As a matter of fact, the first Jew, Abraham, discovered God, not religion, and for that reason is called the first Jew.

**The Rev. Christopher J. McMahon, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Great South Bay, Sayville:**

Unitarian Universalists have very eclectic definitions of God. Some are agnostics, some atheists. Some follow Buddhism, Judaism or Christianity, and many of us borrow from all the world religions -- which kind of describes my theological approach. In my view, what I term "The God Event" is indeed larger than any one religion. Frankly -- and again in my view -- God is indefinable, ineffable, intangible, beyond human explanation, beyond anything the human mind could ever comprehend. To someone who might be an agnostic or an atheist, I say, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." Most likely, I don't believe in that God either. To try to define God is to put human definitions to something that is utterly beyond the scope of human imagination. Actually, I don't think God literally created humanity in "his image." I believe it is we humans who create God in our image. It is our own egos that anthropomorphize God. I see God in all things; in nature, in people, in the universe around us -- all the good, the bad and the ugly. To me these things are not the totality of God, but they are, I believe, manifestations of the divine. It is said "that to love another person is to see the face of God." This, too, is certainly not the totality of God -- but what a beautiful thought and a beautiful metaphor for the divine.

**The Rev. Vicky Eastland, pastor, Brookville Reformed Church, Brookville:**

Absolutely! God isn't confined by our religious dogma. We attempt to put God in a box that is understandable to us so we can feel comfortable, safe and in control. To imagine God being bigger than the whole of any religion, especially our own, can be frightening. If we step outside the box of what we have been taught to believe, we leave the safety of our religious confines. As scary as that may be it allows for the possibility that God's power is beyond our understanding. God becomes larger than the safe boundaries we have built around God. We create boundaries well, drawing geographical lines around countries, dividing our properties with fences, defining others by color of skin or culture; all around us we have placed boundaries to give us the illusion of safety. It is no different in our understanding of God. Placing boundaries around God makes God manageable and creates the false sense that we are in control. To step outside the confines we have created leaves us vulnerable to the possibility that what we have believed about God may actually be flawed or incomplete. Only when we let go of our particular dogma can we begin to experience a more expansive God. To see God through more than just one lens opens us to discover universal truths in other religions. To me, the ability to open the boundaries of our minds to greater truths about God is the very definition of faith.