

Our Images of God

The way we image or imagine what “God” is like forms the foundation of our religious beliefs. Changes in our image inevitably force changes to our way of thinking about God, about ourselves, and about ourselves in relationship with God. An obvious case is if we were to change from imagining God as a strict judge, ready to punish, to being a compassionate, merciful, infinitely loving God. Such a change in our image would almost certainly lead to a change in the way we would pray, worship, and see ourselves in relationship with God—all of which in turn would surely lessen fear and lead to greater peace of mind.

Each of us could probably recall times in our lives when we have been led to change our image of God in some way. Most of us could also mention searching questions we are still asking about the way we image God. “Why?” questions come quickly to mind. Why doesn’t God do this or that? Why does God let this or that happen? The questions we ask are very much bound up with the way we imagine God to be.

Four points stand out clearly when we begin to examine in a thorough manner the way we image God:

1. We are on dangerous ground! There will certainly be a domino effect if we change in any significant way our image of God. The effect will be not only on our personal faith and prayer, but ultimately our belief and worship will change on many levels.

2. We *must* tackle the task. We can no longer afford to carry around images of God that are based on a worldview that no longer reflects reality. Examining how one particular worldview fashioned many of the prevailing images of God will be one of the key steps in the task before us. We have to be able to provide images of God and speak about God in ways that are relevant to today's worldview.

3. We will still be left with questions. We will never fully understand the ultimate mystery that is God, a mystery beyond our comprehension. But hopefully, there will be a profound and significant shift in the nature of our questions, reflecting a more thoughtful image of God.

4. Whatever we do in examining our images of God and in talking about God, we need to remind ourselves constantly that we are not *describing* God; at best we are using images and thoughts that grasp at insights. With these images and thoughts we build a mental model of what God is like. We need to be wary of supposing that our mental model is actually what God is.

One of the biggest problems we encounter when we reflect on what God is like is the tension between two opposite poles. On the one hand, God is the reality that is utterly beyond anything we can describe or imagine, unimaginably intelligent, having no need for nor dependent on anything created, able to exist solely without any created reality. So we speak of God being "transcendent" (literally, rising above, passing beyond, surmounting).

On the other hand, God is *everywhere*. Everything that has existence is permeated with the presence of this divine reality. God can be "seen" and "known" in the beauty and wonder of creation; God is "love" and when we live in love we live in God. God is compassion-

ate, merciful, concerned, forgiving—these are all basic insights we glean from Scripture. That is to say, the reality we name as “God” is here with, involved with, intimately connected with human experience, and indeed, connected intimately with everything that exists. So we speak of God being “immanent,” which literally means actually present or abiding in.

There are pitfalls on both ends of the pole.

The transcendent aspect of God can come to be understood in a way that emphasizes spatial distance rather than a reality that is beyond our comprehension and our images and language. When that happens, the image of God gets locked into the distant God, the God distinct from us who fits the overseer image so prevalent in popular Christian thinking and imagination. This is the God who, as it were, clicks the fingers and creation starts off, then God sits back and watches it unfold, all according to a plan in God’s infinite intelligence, intervening now and then, sometimes in response to our prayer. In popular thinking God is “out there,” watching over, “looking down” on us.

As we will see, this image of God blended well with a cosmology (the study of the universe as a system and our place in it) that understood Earth to be at the center of the universe. It is easy to see how religions working within a primitive cosmology came to image God (or the gods) living above the clouds, looking down on Earth. The dwelling place of evil spirits in these thought patterns was usually somewhere below us, in the underworld: up to heaven, down to hell. Consider how strong that simple religious cosmology has been in shaping our images of God.

Alternatively, the immanent aspect of God can be so stressed that we end up with God being tied to, locked into creation, as if there were no greater dimension to God’s reality. This ultimately leads to an image of God being no greater than the sum total of creation.

We need to keep an eye on both poles as we explore our image of God, our understanding of God’s creative activity, and our relationship with God.

POPULAR CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW

Let us examine the way many Christians imagine God relating with the first human beings and the way this in turn shapes their image of God. We go to the story of Adam and Eve in the second account of creation in the book of Genesis. This story shaped the religious worldview for many of us. Whether we now take the story as literally true or not is not the issue here (but we shall return to it as an issue later); our focus here is simply on the way the story has led people to image human beings' basic relationship with God. Here follows a summary of this account:

God created human beings in God's own image and in the beginning they were closely acquainted with God. Adam and Eve came into "paradise." They had dominion over all creation. But pride and disobedience caused them to do wrong. God reacted to their sin. Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden; they lost paradise. They would now have to endure death.

Women had their own particular punishment:

I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you (Gen 3:16).

And men had theirs:

...cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life....By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gen 3:17-19).

So human beings became the "poor, banished children of Eve, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears." We lost God's friendship. The gates of heaven were locked.

It is always interesting to participate with a group of middle-aged or older Catholics who are sharing the images of this worldview, which they acquired as children, and their understanding of what followed in the story. The sharing is usually along these lines: the souls of all who died after Adam and Eve could not go to heaven. Many

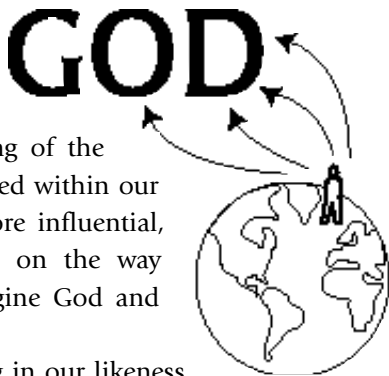
imagined a dark underworld place—the Limbo of the patriarchs was a name given to this “place”—where all the souls went and waited, and waited. Then Jesus came, “saved” them—and us—and by his suffering and death, won back God’s friendship, and opened the gates of heaven. We learned in the Apostles’ Creed that “he descended into hell, and on the third day he rose again.” These words helped to shape our image of the millions of souls waiting and waiting, and of the “Alleluias” that must have been uttered when Jesus came and they rose with him into heaven at last.

From the Adam and Eve story we inherited images that have emphasized the distant God—the God who withdrew from us, the God who closed the gates. When this story went hand in hand with a primitive cosmology it is not surprising that images of God in heaven looking down on us were cemented in our minds. As the diagram below suggests, we are on Earth and God is above, in heaven. Our prayer, for example, goes “up” to God.

We have rarely been encouraged to reflect on the lasting impression and the deeply etched images the popular understanding of the story of Adam and Eve have formed within our psyche. What are some of its more influential, lasting, and questionable effects on the way many people have come to imagine God and our relationship with God?

First, God is viewed as a being in our likeness.

In the creation story, God walked around the garden; God carried on a conversation. Then, because of the sin of Adam and Eve, God withdrew from them. We then carry with us the image of God as “person.” Yes, we may say God is infinite, God is everywhere, God is not an old man in the sky; but the prevailing image of God is still that of a Supreme Person localized somewhere out there or up there, someone who hears and reacts much like a human person hears and reacts. This “localizing” of God has had a powerful influence on the image



of God as the “overseer” and the fact that God is imaged as being male. Our male language about God, “he” doing this or that, cements the image of a particular being in space who listens and reacts.

This image of a God who takes offense at human wrongdoing and reacts, who listens and responds, permeates the general Christian attitude to prayer. Take, for example, a prayer such as, “O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you....” To whom and where is a prayer like that addressed? To a male, localized God in outer space? What does it mean to suggest that God is “offended” by our sin? Does God somewhere-out-there react and want to punish our sin? Sin is real; its effects are harmful. But God reacting and locking us out of heaven? What validity do such images have? How are we imaging God when we engage in this type of discussion?

All this has consequences for the way we think about Jesus and his role. We will see more of this later. How are we to understand language such as “Jesus came to save us”? From where did he come? What do we imagine caused him to come? Many of us were led to imagine a scene in heaven in which God the Father said to the Son something like, “Son, I gave human beings everything and they messed it up. They are not capable of making up to me for the enormous offense they have given, so you had best go down and live the human life as I have wanted it lived. I will then relent, and give them my friendship again, and allow them to come into heaven with us.” So the life and death of Jesus was understood as effecting *a change of attitude within God*.

From this viewpoint, we acquired an understanding of salvation as being primarily concerned with “getting to heaven” or “saving our souls.” For many centuries much of the church’s missionary effort and self-understanding was driven by this same understanding and concern.

For ourselves, personally, we took on enormous guilt. As impressionable children we learned that God was good, God gave us paradise—and we blew it! We failed. We are the cause of death and disaster. We deserve punishment.

What an image of ourselves!

Many of us will recognize in the following statements ideas and attitudes we acquired from the story of the "fall" of Adam and Eve.

- God is all-powerful; God can do anything; God is "perfect"; God cannot change.

- God created our world with living things in perfect harmony.

- Human beings are the cause of death.

- God created, and creation unfolds with God standing back, as it were, watching it unfold according to God's plan.

- God decides what will happen to us in life. God decides, for example, when we will die. We speak of accepting "God's will."

- God can change the weather if we pray hard enough.

- Death will be our meeting time with God; God will judge us; heaven is a place; so is hell.

- God is not close to us; saintly people are the exception because they do great and wonderful deeds.

While this religious worldview may have been adequate for the past 2,000 years, it has become increasingly indefensible in the face of contemporary understanding of the universe and its development.

The challenges to this religious worldview which shaped many of us as Christians are enormous and must be faced squarely if our language about God is to be relevant at the end of the twentieth century. Some of the challenges we must deal with are:

- Human beings did not come into paradise. Disasters and catastrophes of gigantic proportions were part and parcel of this planet's reality long, long before human beings came into existence.

- Death *did not* come into the world through human sin. Again, it was a reality millions and millions of years before human beings walked the planet.

- God is not localized somewhere. God's reality is of an infinite nature. God is everywhere.

- The image of a God figure reacting against us.

- God's responsibility for an inevitably "imperfect," limited creation.

- The fact that Jesus, in his ministry, did not act out of any awareness whatsoever that the poor, the outcasts, the sinners, whoever, had lost God's friendship. In fact, it was quite the opposite. He wanted people to rid themselves (turn from, convert) any ideas, attitudes, or religious practices that suggested God was not close to them in an unconditional, loving way. Jesus was clearly not concerned with changing any attitude within God. He was very clearly focused on people changing their wrong images of God. There is an enormous challenge here to the way Christians generally think about Jesus and his role as "savior." How are we to understand "salvation" and Jesus' role in it?

These ideas will be treated more fully in the pages to follow.

One of the fundamental issues is God's involvement in creation; not just that God created, but the issue of God's connectedness (or disconnectedness) with what came into being. Are we to imagine God as the Super Being who creates then stands back from what has been created, watching "over" it? Late last century, the First Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Filius* (On the Catholic Faith), made this statement at the beginning of its first chapter, "God, Creator of All Things":

As He is one unique and spiritual substance, entirely simple and unchangeable, we must proclaim Him distinct from the world in existence and essence, blissful in Himself and from Himself, ineffably exalted above all things that exist....¹

The statement has to be read in the context of the time. The church was defending the concept of God from what it saw as pantheistic movements—reducing God to nature worship. But in rightly defending the transcendence of God the statement makes it difficult to get away from the image of a "person" (he, him), "distinct from the world," "unchangeable."

Unchangeable? If ever an attribute of God needed close examination it is surely this one. Why can't God change? The traditional philosophical answer has been because God is perfect and perfection by definition rules out any need to change to something different. At

the very least there is a huge problem here if we are to hold at the same time that God is compassionate, feels with, responds to, and is involved in the unfolding universe.

This highlights one of the problems we have in imagining what God is like. We keep bumping into the two poles mentioned earlier: the transcendence and the immanence of God. This can be helpful for us, rather than a constant stumbling block, because it alerts us to the dangers of making absolute statements about God. Transcendence basically means that God is beyond any statement we can make about God. We have to be able to hold the mystery: yes, God is distinct from, other than, not identified by the created universe; and, yes, God is concerned, involved with, intimately connected to, moved by the created universe.

The challenge is whether we can appreciate the reality and the mystery of these two dimensions of God, and at the same time speak meaningfully about this God in relation to our universe and ourselves in the light of today's understanding of the universe (cosmos) and our place in it. What is certain is that the old cosmology has gone and with it many of our religious images: Earth as the center of creation; heaven is "up," and so is God; hell is "below," and so is the devil; God is distinct, apart from us, looking down on us; the beginning of life on this planet characterized by peace and harmony—paradise.

What we then discover is that even slight changes to our thinking and imaging here will influence a significant portion of our religious language. We Christians need to re-image and re-language the basic truths that were packaged in the old cosmology; otherwise, our Christian religious worldview will be seen as an irrelevant museum piece in a world that is rethinking its place in the universe.

Believing that God is actively present *everywhere* in our world and in our universe, can we tell a story about God and our relationship with God which encompasses this reality? And if we can, the next challenge is how to read our Scriptures and how to understand Jesus, human and divine, and ourselves who share the same spirit of Jesus in the light of this story.

Will we, can we, tell a story about the God who is within and through all, a God who is embodied in all that has life, a God who emerges in a wonderful fashion in human beings? Or will we continue to tell a story about a distant overseer God, a “fall” that separated us from God’s love and presence, ourselves as “poor, banished children of Eve, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears,” and a Jesus whose role it is to change God’s mind by his suffering and death?

The challenge may be daunting for most of us, as Christians, to face. But in facing it we may discover a God greater and more life-giving, more freeing and more infinitely loving than we have ever imagined. This reason alone will make exploring the questions worthwhile.

The challenge invites us to break new ground. When we encounter the challenge we find we are shaking some of the foundations of our religious belief system, disturbing long-held, cherished beliefs and images. For some people this can cause confusion and lead to many questions, but this need not be a negative experience. Conversion of mind and heart rarely happens if we are not firstly disturbed from our usual patterns of thinking. Jesus disturbed people this way.

NOTES

1. Neuner, J. and Dupuis J., *The Christian Faith: Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 5th & enlarged ed. (London: HarperCollins Religious, 1992), p. 120.

2. Birch, Charles, *On Purpose* (Sydney: New South Wales University Press, Ltd., 1990), pp. 88-89.

REFLECTION

- Where am I being challenged?
- What are the questions I have about my images of God?
- In what ways do I think in and act out of the traditional model of myself in relation with God?
- How does it influence my prayer? How has it in the past?
- How do I view creation and God’s activity in it?
- What are my reactions to the following passage?

There are many concepts of God and many of them should die.

The primary question is not, do you believe in God? but, what do you think you would be believing in if you did believe in God? There is the God who can do anything, who could prevent nuclear war, who could have prevented the holocaust—but didn't. There is the God who set the universe going in the first place and then left it except for occasional interventions in the form of miracles which rarely happen. There is the God of the gaps who is brought in to fill the gaps left by science; that God grows smaller with every advance in scientific understanding of the universe. There is the cosmic bellhop who sits at the end of a cosmic telephone exchange dealing with billions of calls every minute and whom the caller hopes will alter the course of events to suit the caller. There is the God who requires praise. There is the God who demands sacrifice. There is the God who is on our side in wars who would have us kill for his sake. There is the uncertain God of the soldier's prayer—please God, if there be a God, save my soul if there be a soul! There is the God of judgment who rules by fear and who dispenses post-mortem rewards and punishments. All these theologies of God make things pretty easy for atheists.²