

Who, or what, is God?

If you would have asked me that question at five years old, I would have likely given you a fairly elementary and regurgitated answer. Trying my hardest to remember my Sunday school teachers’ instruction, I might have told you about God’s love or God’s power or even God’s commands. I would have pictured God much like Santa Claus or the “big man in the sky.” God was like a good, but strict Father.

If you would have asked me that question at twelve, I would have spoken about Jesus and how I wanted to accept Christ as a way to reconnect with God and eventually find myself in Heaven. I believed that if I was baptized, God would forgive my sin, and welcome me back into the family.

If you would have asked me this at 22, I would have a focused and excited look in my eye. I would have told you of a God who had a calling and a plan for my life. God had a specific will for me and my career and my future spouse and the place where I was to do ministry. God was on a rescue mission to reach the lost and I got to play a part. I was eager to be involved in the local church and saw it as the “hope of the world.”

If you would have asked me that question at 26, I would sheepishly confessed that I don’t know. I would have spoken about a lost God, a God I used to know. This was a God I couldn’t get myself to believe in anymore. I had seen some things and rethought some things. I was in the middle of a search, of a quest, for God and the answers I had known before didn’t seem to match the questions I was asking at that time.

If you asked me one year ago, I would have told you, “I’m working on it.” I felt that I needed some clarity, some language, a conceptual framework with which to speak of God. The muddy waters of my God-talk arose out of and created a sense of cognitive dissonance. Everywhere you look, there are different conceptions and interpretations of what God is. There is the God we speak about in a church service. There is also the God I encounter when I crane my neck all the way back just to see the tops of the trees. There is the tug on my heart that pulls and calls me toward my neighbor and toward the planet. There are the challenges of Jesus not to worry, to sell everything, to love our enemies. All of these different ways of thinking about God and the potential challenges of actually trying to live out a specific interpretation left me grasping for authentic language and reverting back to tired phrases and ideas.

So, one year ago today, I committed to asking myself this question for a year, “Who, or what, is God?” It would be the topic of my reflection, journaling, the books I read, the podcasts I listened to, the conferences I participated in. I wanted to figure out how to talk about the huge mystery we call “God.” This could be described as a bit of nerdy self-indulgence, but to me, how I answer this question comes with dramatic implications and far-reaching consequences.

Admittedly, when I began this project, I had no clue as to what kind of year I would be asking this question in. 2020 has brought particular questions and challenges to our God-talk. In light

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of one billion animals lost in Australian wildfires, a global pandemic changing how we do virtually everything (pun intended), the political division of an election year, and our nation’s reckoning with institutional racism and inequality, our question about the nature of God is both illuminated and hopefully illuminating.

How do we think about God in a year filled with grief, and fear, and loss for so many? Where is God? Does God even care? Do our old ways of thinking still hold up? All these questions demand our attention and careful consideration. So tonight, I hope to explore the topic of God, how we talk about God, how we think about God, how or if we worship God, and what that means for our lives and for our society.

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APPROACH:

As we begin to explore this question, I want to say something about our approach. This is a question that isn’t meant to be finally answered. If you are expecting to be delivered the secrets of the universe, I must warn you that you’re probably in for a letdown. Our question isn’t an equation where $x = \text{God}$ and we must solve for x . It isn’t a puzzle to be completed that reveals itself when all the pieces fit into place.

We would do better if we calmly, but confidently approached our question and asked it to dance. Leading and being led, we follow this question around the floor moving to the sacred rhythms that pulse and flow. We open ourselves up to the power and the weight of this question. It is a question about the ultimacy of things.

Thinking about God is powerful and dangerous exercise. In attempting to answer our question, we’re attempting to grasp the ungraspable. These three letters have to hold all the layers and nuance that come with trying to conceive of the divine. The ways we think and speak about God influence how we show up in the world. They inform our decisions, values, our hopes, and our dreams.

People across time and space have wrestled with the word “God,” and the ideas behind it. And just below the surface of this word, other questions and implications swim with a frenzy. Why are we here? What *is* here? What are supposed to do with this one, wild life? Is this all some kind of cosmic accident?

We’re looking for an interpretive framework with which to make sense of the beauty and the devastation, the joy and the suffering, the hope and the fear that make up our lives and our world. Confronted with the highs and the lows, and the seeming ambiguities of life, we are attempting to articulate what we’ve experienced. We try to put words to our conclusions. We seek to communicate our ideas with one another and compare notes. Is this how you see it? What do you make of all this?

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The existential force of this line of questioning leads many to outsource their answers. A book is consulted, an authority is trusted, a community provides an assumed script from which to read. We're handed formulas and we pick up clues as to the nature of the divine reality and we settle for the confirmation of our existing circles. We don't push the boundaries, we don't press the issue, we are satiated with the bird in our hand and never seek the two in the bush. So, let us dance. Let us not settle for cheap religion and superficial beliefs. Let us press on. Let us dive into the sacred mystery that has come to be called, “God.”

THESIS

For clarity's sake, I will first announce my general thesis and outline. I borrow Marjorie Suchocki's definition of God as, “the source of all life and goodness.”¹ From this definition, I will attempt to articulate two aspects of our experience of God. The first aspect is our dependence and interrelation to the “source.” God-talk has to answer for evil and suffering at some point, but it also has to answer for beauty, truth, goodness, poetry, art, love, and the power of the natural world. The second aspect I will discuss is God as a critique to the status quo. If life and goodness come from God, our visions of life and goodness do as well. The unsettled feeling one gets when confronted by an unjust world is a divine encounter. “The more beautiful world our hearts know is possible”² is a sacred vision.

After these two affirmations, I will then turn to a few ways of thinking about God that can be unhelpful or misleading. The primary culprit will be what I call the “narrowing of God,” or what Alfred North Whitehead calls, “The fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” This shrinking of our theological imaginations causes us to slip into older metaphysical pictures of the world that lead to the dualistic split between the spiritual and material.

If you make it through both the affirmations and the challenges, I will conclude with a blessing of sorts. Hopefully we will leave with a sense of the wind in our sails and the courage to face our part in bringing the commonwealth of God on earth, as in heaven.

GOD THE HOLDER

“We exist in creative response to relationships.”³

Entangled in our conceptions of God lies the answer to another existential question, “What does it mean to be human?” This question is about humanity's place in the universe. Is there a purpose? Who or what put us here? These are the questions that keep us up at night.

¹ Suchocki, *God-Christ-Church*, ??

² Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World our Hearts Know is Possible*

³ Suchocki, *God-Christ-Church*, 49

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Philosopher Martin Heidegger attempts an answer when he offers his perspective about the “thrownness”⁴ of the human condition. Thrownness is the experience that something or someone thrown us into the world without giving any definitive instructions. It is that existential pit in your stomach that if leaned into can bring about a deep despair. It points to the opaqueness of our world, where it came from, and where it is going.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin describes his experience, writing, “I felt the distress characteristic to a particle adrift in the universe, the distress which makes human wills founder daily under the crushing number of living things and of stars.”⁵

In my own life, I felt Heidegger’s thrownness and de Chardin’s distress when I dismembered the conception God I had previously known. At first there was the sense of falling. The floor was suddenly gone, and the rush of adrenaline began coursing through my body. I could sense the imminence of a total collapse.

But, somehow, I wasn’t actually falling. Even if the floor was gone, the lights were still on and I could still see the walls. Yes, I was an infinitely small part of a vast universe, but this universe wasn’t the cold, dark place I expected. More accurately, it wasn’t *only* the cold, dark place. When I looked around, this universe contained the beauty of stars, and sunsets, and springtime.

Yes, I could understand Heidegger’s assessment, but there seemed to be more to the story. Someone or something was holding me, holding us, the universe. If I couldn’t fully embrace thrownness maybe I could embrace the heldness, the suspension, of the human condition.

Forces, other than myself, had conspired and are still conspiring to hold my existence and I still experience beauty and I’m still drawn into relationship and I can still intuit a vague sense of “truth.” I look at the trees and see that even in our environmental degradation and climate change, they still come to life each spring. The deer are still giving birth, the birds are still singing, and the squirrels are still preparing for this year’s winter.

Jenny Odell says that “nature is inherently optimistic.”⁶ One then asks, what is the reason for their optimism? One interpretation is that they are simply instinctual drives that are programmed through DNA by evolution, and what else would they do anyway? But another way to see it is that whoever and whatever is responsible for or this moment is still beckoning us onward. The future might be worth pursuing. Change might be possible. Tomorrow might not have to be like today.

This was my first sense that what I had called “God” might still correlate to lived reality or experience. This inherent optimism built into the fabric of life is what I began to recognize as the divine. I didn’t have to know or see what the future was or what it could be. I didn’t have to

⁴ Heidegger, *thrown*

⁵ *The Divine Milieu: Teilhard de Chardin*, p 78

⁶ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing*

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have my eschatology (end of the world) worked out. I didn't have to know where I was going when I died. I could simply trust something other than me was working in the world to see a new reality come to pass. Henry David Thoreau recognized this reality at work in the world when he wrote, “Surely joy is the condition of life.”⁷

Teilhard de Chardin speaks of the “depth and universality of our dependence on so much altogether outside our control.”⁸ This dependence is where optimism is rooted. We are not blindly hopeful that goodness exists, we recognize it. We come from it. In all of our experience and our history, we have been propped up, propelled, and in a way, thrown into life. And this is a recognizable aspect of our reality. We exist not of our own volition, but because, our “real position” as Tolstoy said is, “as a creature called out of unconsciousness after an eternity of non-existence to which you may return at any moment.”⁹

I am, we are, held in the Divine. The thrownness of life is mirrored by the giftedness and the heldness of life. The sense that I don't own my life and I am not responsible for my own existence point to something, or a collaboration of somethings, that is providing for life. Our sacred canopies are the lenses through which we perceive and interpret this collaboration of somethings, but even when the canopies of interpretation disappear, the presence of divinity is still holding life. Teilhard de Chardin writes, “By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.”¹⁰

“God” is a word we use as shorthand for this experience. When we come to the end of human capacity, and when we stand before our vast universe, and when glimpse the existence of unimaginably small particles, when we partake in the beauty of a sunset or an approaching storm, we come face to face with God. A word Christians use to describe this is grace. We are graced with life. We are graced with beauty. We didn't arrange for existence or goodness or truth, but we find aspects of them in every place and in every happening. This is why Marjorie Suchocki can say that “God is the source of all life and goodness.”

God is the joy of existence. God is the ground of hope and optimism. God is the sun breaking through the morning clouds. God is kiss of a lover's lips. God is a pot of home-cooked chili or mom's lasagna. God is the smell of fall leaves as they flutter from their summer perch. God is every unique flake of snow as it hits your nose on the way to the ground. God is a dog's tongue hanging out of its mouth as it frolics in giddy delight.

Whatever the divine is, it precedes us. It goes before us. It is here, now. It is calling us onward. It is the bosom in which we are held. It is the grace by which we make our way in the world. Martin Luther King Jr. summed it up like this, “...for as a Christian I believe that there is a

⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Natural His of Massachusetts*

⁸ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 76

⁹ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, 362

¹⁰ Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, p 112

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creative personal power in this universe who is the ground and essence of all reality—a power that cannot be explained in materialistic terms. History is ultimately guided by spirit, not matter.”¹¹

GOD THE CRITIQUE

This vision of God as the source of all life and goodness cannot just stand alone as a religious theory or abstract conception. There becomes too much cognitive dissonance when we look to other aspects of our world. It is no secret that something is not right. This is even more apparent when 2020 has peeled back the curtain and revealed many of the still broken ways in which we relate to ourselves, to one another, and to our planet. The experience of giftedness and dependence alone will not suffice for our understanding of God. God is not the sanctifier of the current. status quo or our present realities.

One important way that God is understood in the Christian tradition is as a critique of the reigning social order and the call for liberation and deliverance. If God, as Suchocki proposes, is “the source of all life and goodness,” then whatever is operating against or opposed to this life and goodness is by definition anti-God. And if, the divine is at work in our world, God is seeking the transformation of the evil, suffering, domination, and inequality we experience around us.

José Porfio Miranda was a Mexican liberation theologian who argued, “As long as people project the Absolute into some ‘objective,’ dimension ... god is an extension of the self and does not transcend the self; ... Only if God locates himself in the very appeal of the ‘other’ can the world be changed.”¹²

Here Miranda is calling into question the ways we confuse God for a substance, a particular being, or an object. In Miranda’s work, *Being and the Messiah*, he makes the case that God is only knowable through the active response to the call for justice or right relation. Only when we set out to set the world right do we encounter the divine.

Miranda contends that God exists as a relational or a political reality. Here, this is not referring to our American partisan landscape, although God’s reality would speak into this sphere of life. What is being articulated is that God can be primarily understood as the vision and call of wholeness, justice, and right relation between all entities. Put more simply and more familiarly, God is love.

This is illustrated in specific instances. Jesus gives the example of the Good Samaritan. The divine is incarnate in the Samaritan’s actions, not in his attitudes or ideas. Love gets its hands dirty; God gets involved. If we then extrapolate this into the systems, institutions, and structures that shape our lives, we’re faced with task of scaling love. How do we imagine love, or God, at work in our churches, our schools, our government, our economy? Who are those on

¹¹ Martin Luther King, *Peace is the Way*,

¹² José Miranda, *Being and the Messiah*

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the side of the road? Who are the Samaritans? Who are the religious leaders too occupied with piety and a busy schedule to stop and help?

The story of the Good Samaritan is so gripping because we know what it’s like to be in trouble, we know what it’s like to see someone in trouble, and we know what it is like to ignore that person. We have all heard God, denied God, and continued on with the demands of everyday life.

When we understand God this way, we can think in very different ways and ask very different questions. One of the most illuminative is to postulate as to whether or not God is “here.” Where is God located? If God is locked in our symbolic prison as some sort of being or entity, this question is utterly nonsensical.

However, this question can be a sort of map or guide for a Christian spirituality if we set God free from “concrete God.” Where is God? God is one of those people “on the side of the road.” We can now ask this question in any situation or institution or social arrangement. We must learn to ask, “Is God here?” If God “showed up” what would that look like? Our answer is that it would look like someone on the side of the road, someone hanging on the crosses of our day, in the face of our neighbor, we would see God in places of poverty, and in systems that prioritize profit at the expense of people and planet.

If God is, again, the source of all life and goodness, God will not stand by unmoved by the cries of the oppressed. God will take sides. God will work on behalf of those at the bottom. God pronounces, “blessed are the poor,” not in celebration of their poverty but in judgement of the people and institutions that relegate them to it.

This is the place where our theology can get uncomfortable. This is where the liberating God becomes a critique of the status quo, of the powers that be, and of the current world order. The question pries a bit deeper when turned toward our own alliance with the current world order or with those on the bottom of our power and economic hierarchies. The uncomfortable part is that many who may be watching this talk, certainly including myself, benefit from the hierarchies in our world.

The story of the Good Samaritan gets pretty confrontational when we have to identify ourselves in the characters. Do our lives look like those on the side of the road? Are we Samaritans? Or are we religious leaders. Who do we resemble? A bit more stark, but perhaps more cutting, are we closer to Pharaoh and the beneficiaries of Egyptian wealth or to their brickmaking, Hebrew slaves.

It may seem like we’re framing this as an “either-or” paradigm, but this is exactly what the prophetic voices in the Christian tradition have done throughout history. There is either justice or there is not.

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For many American, middle-class Christians, our lives exist on a bed of opportunity. In our comfort and in our means, we are insulated and anesthetized from the situations that would put us before “the face of God.” We have very small amounts of what Sallie McFague calls “wild space.”¹³ Wild Space is any area or aspect of our lives that don’t fit the stereotypical ideal of our society. Our wild space is found in spaces where we’re outside the norm or society doesn’t exactly work for us. With this perspective we can learn to see through God’s eyes and to view our ways of living through the prism of justice and right relation. In other words, only with the eyes of the Samaritan or the man in the ditch, can we see God.

One of the difficulties is that our comfort and convenience crowd out and blind us to the realities of our wild space. If we are not connected to our own displacement, we can tend to blame other’s displacement on their own actions. “The man in the ditch shouldn’t have been traveling that road alone, doesn’t he know the danger?” When, in fact, the religious leaders were traveling the same road but by happenstance didn’t encounter the same fate.

The issue here, is that we can also mistake chance or society’s arrangements for the work and will of God in our lives. These two forces combine to form our wealth, our opportunity, and our privilege. Yes, God, the source of all life and goodness wants good things for us. But, when we attribute all the positive breaks in our lives to God’s hand, we, as Bruno Mars sings, “blame it on Jesus, #blessed.”

In our world of interdependence and entanglement, we do find goodness, truth, and beauty. But God wants and intends good things for those on the bottom of our world order as well. Phrasing it this way is helpful to clarify that poor people are not poor because God wants them to be. Poor people are poor because we haven’t found a way of living together that takes care of all God’s children.

The call, the invitation, the imperative that the source of all life and goodness places on us to make sure each and every person, and the beings we share this beautiful planet with, have access to that life and goodness that flow out of that which we have called God.

In examining our God-talk and theological reflections, we must ask ourselves, “Is my idea of God a liberating force for the poor, the outcast, and the planet?” or “Does my idea of God want to keep things the way they are?” As much as we are comfortable in and allied to the ways of the world, I believe we are missing God.

CHALLENGES

One of the most frustrating aspects of claiming to “believe in God,” is that what we just outlined is not what many people mean when they use the word God. In this next section, I hope to lay out a few mistakes that are common and easy to make when thinking and talking about the idea of God.

¹³ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*

MISPLACED CONCRETENESS

The first area of concern I want to deal with is that of overstatement. The map is not the territory¹⁴, the menu is not the meal¹⁵, and our ideas about God are not God. In order to speak honestly and carefully about God we must come to recognize the limits of our tools for the task. Our language, conceptualizations, and the ability to deal with abstractions are incredibly useful ways for approaching God-talk. However, these tools are severely limited and when we don't understand or recognize these limits, our God-talk can go sideways quickly.

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead cautions us against this overstatement with what he calls the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”¹⁶ Misplaced concreteness happens when we mistake the map for the territory. It occurs when we assume that our abstract conception of God directly correlates to who, or what, God actually is.

For example, this fallacy arises, when I say, “I'm an extrovert.” I have news for many of you. An extrovert is not a thing. There is not a subspecies of human being called extrovert as opposed to introvert. These are descriptions of personality traits that we place onto people ad hoc to help categorize and understand their behavior. There are many factors that go into shaping one's extroversion or introversion, and an individual's placement on the spectrum is also fluid. It can shift over time.

If we refuse to acknowledge this limitation, we run the risk of boxing people in, demanding they act like their personality type, and radically misunderstanding the nature of introversion and extroversion.

This can show up in the way we speak to ourselves. One could find themselves believing, “I'm an extrovert, I need to be around people all the time.” While in reality, learning to be alone and wrestling with silence and solitude can be an immensely beneficial thing for all sorts of people.

This sort of silly example depicts what we can do to God if we literalize or overstate our descriptions of divinity. When our God-talk becomes concrete, solid, with no way to evolve, transform, or include, we find ourselves claiming things about God we never set out to claim.

Sallie McFague reminds us of the constructive and deconstructive nature of God-talk. First, we must attempt to say something about God, but then comes the necessity of critiquing what has been said. McFague writes, “Deconstruction cautions us against trying to save ourselves through our constructions. The temptation is to seek security. By seeking security through our constructions, we refuse to step outside the houses of language we have erected to protect us from the emptiness and the terror we cannot control. Our safe havens, called dogmas and

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Korzybski

¹⁵ Alan Watts

¹⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process & Reality*

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orthodoxy, become absolutes, giving the illusion of being certain, being ‘on the inside,’ having truth.”¹⁷

Joan Chittister says this more simply, “God is the mystery nobody wants.”¹⁸ Sister Chittister means by this that we all want clarity and much of our God talk is an attempt to find said clarity. Clarity and security are not inherently bad, that’s what we’re after, but the acknowledgement of our limitations is an important piece of that clarity.

Dorothee Soelle explains, “When you study theology it is important to understand the all our God-language has symbolic character, and thus that there are very different ways of talking about God, so that you really cannot say that God *is* father, as if the two were identical. That means that every symbol that sets itself up as absolute has to be relativized. God is really greater than our talk about God, greater than any of our languages. We have to be aware of that, because otherwise we will lock ourselves into symbolic prisons.”¹⁹

We must make assertions about divinity, the nature of reality, and how to live a good life. We must seek to know and understand who God is. In doing so, we throw things against the wall and we see what sticks. Fortunately, we are not alone in this and we arrive in the twenty-first century swimming in a deep stream of God-talk, carried by currents of faithful seekers of truth, knowledge, and wisdom. Yet, even with what we’ve been handed and what we’ve received, we must attempt to examine and refuse to mistake the abstract for the concrete.

Whitehead further describes the rational pursuit of God-knowledge saying, “Rationalism is an adventure in the clarification of thought, progressive and never final. But it is an adventure in which even partial success has importance.”²⁰

So, it is with caution, humility, and open-handedness that we approach a knowledge of God. We move forward with an “acknowledgement of ignorance.”²¹ Our ideas about God are not God. We must heed the warning of Thich Nhat Hanh, “A finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The finger is needed to know where to look for the moon, but if you mistake the finger for the moon itself, you will never know.”²²

DUALISM

This misplaced concreteness, or the moon-finger dilemma, shows up in modern, Christian God-talk in the form of what’s called **dualism**. Dualism is a mode of thinking that imagines two distinct realms. There exists a spiritual realm and a material realm with very little, to no overlap. In a dualistic depiction of reality, heaven, God, is up there, and we, are down here on

¹⁷ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 25

¹⁸ Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief*

¹⁹ Soelle, *Window of Vulnerability*, 70

²⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 9

²¹ Jack Miles, *Religion as We Know It: An Origin Story*

²² Thich Nacht Hanh

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earth. Dualism is the clear distinction between spirit and matter. John Thatamanil argues that when we slip into dualism, “Gone is a properly infinite God. What remains is a deity subject to the categories of space, time, causality, and substance. The God of dualism is an entity who resides in heaven, acts in time, causally interacts with other beings, and is one substance among others.”²³ Once we have accepted a dualistic metaphysic, our God has become more like Santa Claus or Zeus and our imaginative limits are bounded. When we “spiritualize” God, we fit our reflections into this dualistic paradigm.

Dualism is a challenge to our God-talk because it splits the field of perception. If God is imagined in another realm or plane of existence, God is not here. Therefore, any action on God’s part has to be an invasion of our natural world from on high and our day-to-day life becomes a sort of mechanistic process.

Whitehead comments on this by saying, “An old established metaphysical system (read: spiritual dualism) gains a false air of adequate precision from the fact that its words and phrases have passed into current literature. Thus, propositions expressed in its language are more easily correlated to our fitting intuitions into metaphysical truth.”²⁴ In other words, he’s saying that though historically, we’ve inherited dualistic language about God, to make these assertions *concrete* gives us “a false air of adequate precision.”

If God and the world are completely separate entities, all sorts of questions arise with regard to how we experience God, how God acts in the world, what God cares about, and why God chooses some times to intervene and others to remain distant. For instance, one could imagine dualistic God “stepping in” to stop atrocities like the Holocaust, or relative’s cancer diagnosis, or even to protect a small child from physical abuse. If God could have stepped in, yet refused, this God seems to be a monster, even if somehow, “all things work together for the good.”

Is God a thing? Yes, if by “thing” you mean a gathered topic of conversation about ultimate reality that exists in our shared conception. Yes, if you mean an experienced reality that people have pointed to for thousands of years. That’s what these faith traditions are handing us. They’re offering wisdom and lineage to life, death, love, loss, beauty, and pain. No, God is not a thing, if you mean God is a thing like that chair is a thing. God doesn’t exist “inside” of our cosmos as a separate entity like the chair. We can talk about God as if God were like the chair, but we must recognize that this is shorthand, it’s a heuristic. This isn’t primarily who or what God is, this is how we experience or sense or seek to comprehend God.

Douglas John Hall says, “At the center of the faith there is great mystery and you can’t go on boasting as if you really understand this mystery.”²⁵ We use images and metaphors and wayfinding signs to refer to God, not GPS coordinates or a map or a blueprint. Unlike the chair, knowledge of God cannot help us repair the chair, or build a new chair, or even know how it will

²³ Thatamanil, *Immanent Divine*, 30

²⁴ *Process & Reality*, p 13

²⁵ Douglas John Hall, Podcast on *Homebrewed Christianity*

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act when we sit on the chair. Yes, God is like the chair in certain ways; it can be felt, experienced, it supports us. God is very unlike the chair in other ways and we must be careful to remember this when attempting to describe Ultimate Reality.

One could easily make the interpretive leap from Soelle’s symbolic prisons or Whitehead’s old metaphysical statements and transpose that framework onto much of current Christianity. Christian dogma can be depicted as an outdated approach for our modern world. Many in this time and place have already done this. Much of society has deemed the church out of touch, or irrelevant, or even harmful in its ancient conception of how the world works. It is not that twenty-first century America has never heard the “good news.” It has heard the news and dismissed it as archaic or old-fashioned because Christians hold so fast to their depictions and interpretations of God.

What if we are not absolutely and for all time correct as to who we think God is. What if we (the church) are stuck with centuries of assumptions that cloud our perception and limit our imaginative bandwidth. If our institutional church exists to help us navigate ultimate reality and experience the divine life, maybe it has largely failed.

We have been handed neatly packaged theological statements and are asked to deduce our God-talk from those formulations, these abstractions. This is the way we read and approach scripture. It is like we’re starting with the solution to the problem and we’re just seeking the right question to corroborate our position.

How else do we explain the seriousness with which the church debates and soft pedals issues of LGBTQ belonging and identity but the careless way with which we interpret the rich man, the camel, and the eye of the needle?

Using metaphysical descriptions and becoming overly attached to our phraseology and formulations is a hinderance to faith. Using language too tightly to define God can be an attempt to “stand outside of God.”²⁶ In this way, we trick ourselves into believing that we can control or grasp or understand God.

Whatever we end up saying about God has to resonate with our lived reality. It has to speak into our lives, our financial situations, our social relations, and our political systems. God-talk cannot exist simply as official theological statements which we somehow mentally ascent to, or at minimum, but most often, verbally ascent to. Our theology must come down from the clouds and engage us at ground level.

CONCLUSION

I am far from settling the question of “Who, or what, is God?” but I do believe that I have found a few breadcrumbs from experience, from the stream of historical Christianity, and from the

²⁶ Jose Miranda, *Communism and the Bible*

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witness of the Christian canon. It isn't the final destination but is enough to go on. The dancing will continue. The act of dancing with this question is something that has been a grace in my life.

As I begin to summarize and conclude this talk, I want to hone in on a quote from Carter Heyward. She writes, “Jesus is not operating on a religious theorem. He is co-operating in an experience of close, natural relation between himself and that which he knows to be Yahweh, God of Israel, of righteousness, of justice.”²⁷

I take this quote to illustrate the danger of taking as primary what Heyward refers to as “religious theorems.” In a classical formulation, knowing about God is not the same as knowing God. I believe you, I, we are being invited to experience the divine, to soak in the heldness of our human condition, and to trust the mysterious other that carries us along.

As my theological hero, Dorothee Soelle says, “Life is no individual and autonomous achievement. Life cannot be made, produced, or purchased, and is not the property of private owners. Instead, life is a mystery of being bound up with and belonging to one another.”²⁸

Friends, we exist in a world with enough hints to beauty that we know more is possible. God has given us the taste of heaven and has called us to be the hands and the feet and hearts that bring it to be. The vision you have a better world, a better tomorrow, is not just hopeful optimism, but is based in the reality of God's love for all creation.

Let us not get distracted by misplaced concreteness. Let us let God out of our symbolic prisons. A dualistic conception of God blinds us to God's ongoing work in our world. The forces of love and justice, hope and compassion are alive and they are on the move. And this vision of God is for all people.

If we close our ears to the people on the side of the road, if we walk by in order to keep to our schedule and get on with our life, we will miss the very God we seek. Let us become a community on the lookout for God. No one person can do this on their own, and we aren't meant to.

In 2020 and beyond, we are keenly aware of those who society is not working for. We are keenly aware of those on the bottom. We are keenly aware of our own alienation and displacement. In our cries and in the cries of others, let us hold fast to a vision of God that holds and sustains, that comforts and encourages.

I couldn't help but end this on one more quote from Dorothee Soelle, “To sing of peace in the midst of war, I believe, was the secret of the people in the New Testament, who trembled

²⁷ Carter Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 39

²⁸ Dorothee Soelle, *More Than Bread Alone*

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under a comparable misanthropic empire and sang their different songs. Thus they ‘lived poetically’ and shared with each other in a different language.”²⁹

God is a language far different than the one society teaches us to speak.

Let us speak of God.

²⁹ Dortehe Soelle, *On Earth as in Heaven*