



---

**SUMMER THEOLOGY INSTITUTE JOURNAL 2007**

*Augsburg College  
Minneapolis, Minnesota*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Introduction—<i>Imago Dei</i></b>  | 3  |
| <b>Journey Over Full Comprehension</b><br><i>by Jessica Spanswick</i>                     | 4  |
| <b>Children's Pictures of God</b><br><i>by Rebecca Rathjen</i>                            | 6  |
| <b>Mirror</b><br><i>by Kristi Wietecha</i>  | 8  |
| <b>Finding the Image of God in the Book of Esther</b><br><i>by Amy Rahn</i>               | 11 |
| <b>Faith Like a Tunnel</b><br><i>by Amanda Brateng</i>                                    | 13 |
| <b>Don't Forget About Me</b><br><i>by Samantha Masero</i>                                 | 15 |
| <b>Breaking Down the Stereotypes</b><br><i>by Murrta Wyatt</i>                            | 18 |
| <b>Beyond Tolerance: Embracing Our Religious Diversity</b><br><i>by Mari Feld</i>         | 21 |
| <b>The Fate of Atheists</b><br><i>by Eric Christenson</i>                                 | 24 |
| <b>1+1+1=1: Explaining the Trinity</b><br><i>by Maddie Jensen</i>                         | 26 |
| <b>Seeing God</b><br><i>by Andrew Papke-Larson</i>  | 27 |
| <b>Science, Religion, and the Question of Creation</b><br><i>by Julia M. Schiefelbein</i> | 28 |
| <b>The Image of God Through Poetry</b><br><i>by Brittney Sickman</i>                      | 31 |
| <b>God and Gender</b><br><i>by Hannah Johnson</i>   | 34 |
| <b>Be a Servant: Let His Love Shine</b><br><i>by Jill Kobilka</i>                         | 35 |
| <b>Economics of our Faith</b><br><i>by Hilary Vokovan</i>                                 | 37 |
| <b>Suffering with God</b><br><i>by Kayla Nordahl</i>                                      | 40 |
| <b>Riding Tandem</b><br><i>by Eric Stene</i>  | 42 |
| <b>Imago Dei Dialogue</b><br><i>by Emily Kimball</i>                                      | 44 |

Editor: Ross Murray  
Editorial Assistant: Ruth Senum



# IMAGO DEI

Welcome to the 2007 Summer Theology Institute Journal. This journal is the product of a week of theological exploration by 21 high school youth. They gathered at Augsburg College June 24-29, 2007 to study and explore the image of God in today's world.

Before they arrived, the youth read *Speaking of God*, by Paul Sponheim. Sponheim asks questions about how we talk about God with any certainty, why we talk about God, how we talk to God, and even how we talk for God. This book helped prepare the youth for a week of wondering how God appears in our contemporary world.

Leading them through the exploration of *Imago Dei* was Jeremy Myers, Professor of Youth & Family Ministry in Augsburg's Religion Department. Professor Myers showed popular media images of God, talked about the portrayal of God in the scriptures, and challenged youth to articulate their own understanding of who God is.

Following the Summer Theology Institute, the youth wrote essays that took them deeper into specific topics related to the image of God. This journal is a compilation of those essays. You will find that the youth found creative ways to express their ideas of how God appears in the world. Some wrote theological treatises, while others wrote personal reflections. You will even find poetry and fiction within these pages.

The Summer Theology Institute seeks to expand the theological imagination of youth in the Church. It is our goal to help shape how youth think but not tell them what to think. As you read these essays, ask yourself how the youth in your life think about God. What images do they hold? These essays may be a springboard to understanding what the popular image of God is within your own community.

If you know of a youth who demonstrates theological imagination and curiosity, consider nominating him or her for the 2008 Augsburg College Youth Theology Institute, which is to be held June 15-20, 2008. For more information, nominations and applications, contact Ross Murray, Youth Theology Institute Program Director, at 612-330-1151 or [murray@augsb.org](mailto:murray@augsb.org).

Please enjoy the following essays.

Ross Murray  
Program Director  
Summer Theology Institute

# JOURNEY OVER FULL COMPREHENSION

*Jessica Spanswick, Ottertail, MN*

“In speaking of God, we make strong statements.” Jeremy Myers, a religion professor at Augsburg College, brought this notion to conscious deliberation among us chosen to attend the Summer Theology Institute at Augsburg College. Throughout the week at Augsburg, we students discussed *Imago Dei*, the image of God, and learned how to think theologically and independently. The idea that finite creatures on earth like us can even attempt to speak of an omnipotent, infinite God astounded me! How can our minds even begin to understand such a magnificent God? In the words of Myers, “do we really know?” The process of searching for God and the meaning of life is more important than the end product of a final answer, which does not even exist in humanly comprehension. Therefore, we, as creatures, should never cease to search for God, but, in doing so, we also need to recognize that our God is far beyond our intellectual capacity.

“To know is, indeed, to know how little you know.” Paul R. Sponheim’s book, *Speaking of God: Relational Theology*, is an inspiration in the theology world. The postscript entitled “Falling Silent” devotes itself to the idea that after speaking and debating so much of God and who He is, guessing and checking our way into finding answers, there comes a time to simply “fall silent” (149). Sponheim shows the Creator of the universe is over our head, beyond our comprehension, and bigger than we can imagine. With this being true, however, God still desires for us to seek Him.

There are many places that I search when seeking for God. In these places, I am able to be confident in *some* things but not all. For example, the Bible is an obvious and primary choice in searching. There people are promised love and eternal life. God is found in the Word but also in the sacraments. Both in baptism and communion we can be confident that God is present. There are many things that people say in speaking of God, but, as Professor Myers says, can we really be sure?

I believe that God gave us all some level of comprehension of Him. He gave us things that we can be sure of; for example, creation, the life and death of Jesus Christ, and the promise of eternal life. But in between all these guarantees, there are many gray areas. Do we really know *how* God created the earth? What order did He create in? Is it possible that God could have used evolution within the common creation story in Genesis? Scientists, theologians, and scholars hold many contrasting opinions as to this topic. Among Christianity alone, there are hundreds of theories.

In the words of Maximus the Confessor in Sponheim’s *Speaking of God*, there is a “learned ignorance, ...for the ignorance about God on the part of those who are wise in divine things is not a lack of learning, but a knowledge that knows by silence that God is unknown” (151). After researching who God is, I have come to agree with Professor Myers, who says that “we can know something!” No, no person will have all the answers to life’s questions. 1 Corinthians 13:12 states, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as we have been fully known.” Paul, an amazingly influential apostle of Jesus Christ, with all his understanding and experience, recognizes that this earth does not offer full understanding. It is amazing to think that after realizing this, Paul still remains one of the most significant characters in the New Testament aside from Christ Himself. He still sought God and His will for a lifetime, knowing fully that he would not always understand why God asked him to do some things.

Does any person have a true, complete image of God? Each perspective has its own bias, does it not? All should agree that no view will ever be all-knowing or infallible. For example, Islam has a wonderful theology by naming “hundred-minus-one” names for God (Sponheim, 150). There are 99

names for God, including Allah and Al-Majeed among others, but the last name, number 100, is left unidentified. The Muslims agree that as many characteristics that we can attribute to God, our list will never be extensive, the 100th name will not be revealed in this life. That kind of humble realization is on what all humans should agree.

During my stay at Augsburg for the Summer Theology Institute, the students were given the opportunity to meet with Paul Sponheim for one hour, asking any questions about his book, philosophies, or theology in general. When asked about the human image of God, Sponheim replied that “there will always be ambiguity.” Even Sponheim, probably one of the most intelligent men I have been blessed with the opportunity to speak with, agrees that he does not know all the answers.

Another thing that we can be sure of is the gift of wisdom. According to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes *New International Version Bible*, wisdom is “the understanding that comes from God” (NIV). 1 Kings 3 tells the story of King Solomon, a wise ruler who desired discernment in administering justice. The Lord said to Solomon, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you” (5), and Solomon replied, “I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties...so give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong” (7,9). If a great king who was right in the Lord’s sight recognizes his lack of understanding in comparison to the Lord’s, should not all people reach this conclusion also?

Further in the story, God blessed Solomon for his humility. The Lord gave Solomon discernment and wisdom because he asked for it. Here lies another promise from God. If we ask for his wisdom, it will be given to us; of this we can be sure. So, out of all the things we cannot know, there are some that we can.

Another example of humbled knowledge is Job. Job was blessed with a plentiful, successful life by God. Soon the devil took that all away from Job: his family, property, and servants. Job could not understand why God, his friend, was letting this happen in his life! In conversation with some friends, it is concluded, “How great is God—beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out” (36:26). Job eventually came to the realization that he would not understand all things in life. “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know...my ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you” (42:3,5). In response to Job’s humility, the Lord said, “You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:8).

“Since we are finite beings, we have no natural ability to create the idea of infinity—the idea must have come from some infinite source who is other than man” (Cantelon, 18). There we have it; our minds are too limited to create a clear, fully-developed conception of the infinite. Nevertheless, we can know something. We can know that our ideas, all the guesses and checks included, however crazy or realistic they all may be, are drawing us closer to a true depiction of God. We may never come to the end product, knowing exactly who God is and how He works in all His majesty. In fact, we never will, at least not until “then” when “we will see clearly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Until that day, let us never cease in searching for God! Let us never despair in discovering God in the shadows, behind the bushes, or on a street corner. Let us pray for his wisdom, and let it fall on us from heaven! Amen.

## Sources

- Cantelon, J. *Theology for nontheologians*. New York, NY: Macmillan publishing company. 1998.  
*God’s Game Plan NIV Bible*, Nashville, TN: Serendipity House. 1997.  
Myers, Jeremy. Lecture. June 24-29th, 2007  
Sponheim, Paul. *Speaking of God*, Relational Theology. Danvers, MA: Clearance Center. 2006.  
Sponheim, Paul, Personal interview, June 28th, 2007

# CHILDREN'S PICTURES OF GOD

*Rebecca Rathjen, Eden Prairie, MN*

Professor Paul Sponheim states that “the Christian claim is that God is present to all, and in that sense we may say that all ‘experience’ God” (17). Within that “all” are children. Children experience God and have their own personal images of God from a young age. Recognizing the child’s image of God, the parent’s role in developing that image, and the responsibility of family and faith community in developing that image are critical to seeing faith passed on to the next generation.

Recently I was talking to a seven year old boy, Michael, who I watch occasionally. I asked him if he could draw a picture of God. He replied that he did not know what God looked like and could not draw a picture. I imagine that with more discussion and questioning he may have been able to come up with a representation of God using the traditional images that children in the United States continue to adhere to: Creator, Healer and Friend. Michael, as a protestant child, may adhere to the images of Creator, Healer, Friend, and Father more strongly than adults in the Protestant community over the age of forty. As he grows into adulthood, Michael may shift to identify God with a more maternal image and more strongly in the images of spouse and liberator as the trend suggests. When comparing images of God around the world, Michael, as a citizen of the United States, will tend to have a more paternal image of God than citizens of other countries (Roof).

These prevailing images of God among children have positive connotations and support post modern theology in moving toward a more loving image of God and away from a punishing and wrathful God (De Roos). During the classroom sessions at the Summer Theology Institute, Professor Jeremy Myers touched on a prevailing image of God among teens called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (Myers). This system of beliefs supports a God who created the world, a God who teaches us right from wrong, and a God who makes us feel better, but this God is inactive and leaves the world to fend for itself. While this belief system is more complex than seven year old Michael could articulate, these are the images of God that our children and teens have developed.

Michael and other children’s images and concepts of God develop primarily from parent-child relationships (Dickie). “It is those deep interpersonal meetings that provide the best parallel to knowing God in relationship” (Sponheim 19) and from those relationships, images of God are created. These images are learned both deliberately and unintentionally as children watch how their parents interact with other people and based on how the child understands their relationship with their parents (De Roos). Children have been found to adopt their parents’ image of God and blend it with an image of their parents to create their own image of God (Dickie). The youngest children begin creating an image by perceiving their parents to be God like because of the dependence on parents during the first year of life (De Roos). As the child ages, their reliance on their parents lessens as does the notion that God is strictly like their parents (Dickie).

While that is the case, children continue to learn about God’s image through their parents. The relationship between mother and child has proven to be very important in developing a child’s image of God. Because women have been found to be more religious than men, and because mothers are the primary caregivers, the image of God is primarily influenced by mothers (De Roos). In fact, when a child feels close to its mother you can predict that child will feel close to God. With respect to the father, if the father is absent from the home, it is thought that the child may take on God as the father figure. This replacement can cause the child to have a more nurturing and powerful image of God in addition to a more idealized image of God to fill the role of the father. The child’s perception of the relationship between the parent and the child also impact the child’s image of God. If the parents and especially the father are nurturing, God is perceived to be nurturing. If the mother is powerful, then God is perceived to be more powerful (Dickie). Similarly, if a parent is angry toward the child, God is perceived to be more distant, less caring, and less forgiving (De Roos).

The methods of childrearing also impact our children's images of God. A study by De Roos found that if a mother has an authoritarian and strict image of God, then the mother used stricter children rearing practices. In turn, the child developed a more potent, punishing God concept. On a larger scale, cultures with loving child rearing practices have belief systems with more loving and benevolent deities. This can be expressed in the atmosphere surrounding talking about God; if a person is happy and smiling when talking about God, the child's God concept becomes more trusting, loving, and caring (De Roos). In these ways, "by the age of six, all children have constructed some image or representation of God" (Caldwell 35).

Our children's image of God is important because personal faith relies on one's concept of God (De Roos). As children grow and learn in their relationship with God, they grow and learn as people. Denis Linn, author of *Good Goats*, explains that "we become like the God we adore" (Linn 7). If we adore a God who is loving and caring, then we become loving and caring. If this God cares about social justice, then we care about social justice (Linn 42). It is with great responsibility that we come to know God so that we can emulate God and share God with our children.

Deuteronomy chapter 6 points out the necessity of passing faith and knowledge of God to our children. Moses told the people that the greatest command is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5) Then in the next breath Moses tells the people to "impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:7-8 NIV). There is a sense of urgency in the words to be constantly sharing the commandment with our children.

The task may seem daunting, but it is more a way of life than a set of rules to follow. Outside of Sunday School and worship services, children continue to learn about God from parents and family. Everyday thoughts, conversations, and imaginations can be used to talk about faith (Caldwell 45). Rabbi Marc Gellman and Monsignor Thomas Hartman have given parents tips on sharing faith intentionally with children. They start by suggestion that parents let kids watch the religious things they do (Caldwell 44). After all, the best teaching by adults is done by example (Caldwell 18). Gellman and Hartman also advise retaining some of the wonder about God by not giving too simple of answers to children. They also remind parents that in conversation with children it is okay to say that you do not know something about God (Caldwell 44).

In conclusion, after taking a moment to look at children's images of God and their origins, one can help these images to grow and change as a child ages. Recognizing the prevailing images, how these images were formed in parent-child relationships, and looking at the responsibility and opportunity to show our children God can be exciting and challenging. It is helpful to remember that we know "a God who wills to be known" and who wills to be known to all people including children (Sponheim 6). With this in mind, let us continue to discuss and come to know our God so that we can share this God with our children.

## Sources

- Caldwell, Elizabeth F. *Making A Home For Faith*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000.
- De Roos, Simone A, Jurjen Iedema, and Siebren Miedema. "Influence of Maternal Denomination, God Concepts, and Child-Rearing Practices on Young Children's God Concepts." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Dec. 2004: 519-535. ATLA. Concordia University Library. 10 July 2007 <<http://concordia.csp.edu/Library>>.
- Dickie, Jane R., et al. "Mother, Father, and Self: Sources of Young Adults' God Concepts." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* March 2006: 57-71. ATLA. Concordia University Library. 10 July 2007 <<http://concordia.csp.edu/Library>>.
- Linn, Dennis, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn. *Good Goats*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994.
- Myers, Jeremy. Lecture, June 24-29, 2007.
- Roof, Wade Clark, and Jennifer L. Roof. "Review of the Polls: Images of God Among Americans." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23 June 1984: 201-205. ATLA. Concordia University Library. 10 July 2007 <<http://concordia.csp.edu/Library>>.
- Sponheim, Paul R. *Speaking of God*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006.

# MIRROR

*Kristi Wietecha, Eagan, MN*

Everyday when I look in the mirror, I see the same old me: a tall, freckled, and redheaded young woman. I wonder, when God wakes up in the morning, what does He see in the mirror? Does He also see red hair and freckles? After all, I am created in His image. Not being able to picture God makes it rather difficult sometimes to grasp what it means to be created in the image of God. While the Bible gives us figurative depictions, it does not supply us with a clear physical picture. So, when I learned the theme for the 2007 Summer Theology Institute was *Imago Dei*, the image of God, I was hoping to find some answers.

Unfortunately, God's image became even more puzzling to me as conflicting images of God were revealed during our first class discussion. I wondered how God could be loving and difficult at the same time. It was not until Professor Jeremy Myers explained the Holy Trinity that I realized how all these conflicting images centered at God's core: a relationship. By seeing God as a relationship, I could more fully understand the complexities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and their relationships with each other. That got me thinking: if we are created in the image of God, which is a relationship, what does that mean for us as Christians? I believe it means we are simply to live in relationship with God and with one another. By exploring the relationships within the Triune God, Christians can learn how to live in God's image in their own relationships.

The Holy Trinity, consisting of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a central doctrine of the Christian faith. Although an integral part of Christianity, the Trinity is full of complexities. For example Myers explained that the Father is not the Son or the Spirit, but the three entities all make up God. Therefore, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are in interdependent relationships with each other. Since love is God's "category proper," Christians can infer that these relationships are filled with understanding and love (Sponheim 44). So, the Trinity consists of relationships that Christians are to model themselves after. But, what exactly do those relationships look like? How do the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit make up God while each one is subtly different?

Theologian Thomas A. Smail provides an answer to these questions. He points out that the uniting factor of the Trinity is their freedom to love and their freedom to express that love (Smail 27). This love can be seen throughout the Bible. For example, the Father created us out of love, the Son died for us because He loved us, and the Spirit is in our lives to keep us on the path towards that love. However, there are subtle differences in the way they each carry out or display their love. Smail explains that the Father uses "purposeful initiation," the Son "obedient responsiveness," and the Holy Spirit "creative fulfillment" (Smail 27).

In other words, the Father initiates love and relationships because He intervenes in the world by continually creating. The Father is caring and helps His creation through problems people cannot deal with on their own (Smail 28). The Son forms a relationship with the Father by His natural response to the Father's actions and words. Throughout Jesus' entire life on earth, He continually stressed his obedience to the Father; the prime example being his sacrificial death on the cross (Smail 29). Finally, the Holy Spirit is in a relationship with the Father and Son by glorifying the accomplishments of the Father's creation and the Son's death and resurrection by spreading the Gospel through the hearts and minds of human beings. As Smail explained, "The Father starts it all, but the Spirit completes it all... [and] leads to fullness of life at the end" (Smail 31).

Through their relationships, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit make up the true image of God: active, loving, responsive, and eternal. This is how we were created. Humans are called by God to be in relationships with Him and the rest of creation. In the words of Smail, "being in the image of God is to be understood as a mirroring of the Father...the Son...and the Holy Spirit" (22). This metaphor helps

portray what our relationships are to look like. Humans need to reflect the relationships within the Trinity in order to grow deeper with God and one another.

By being in a relationship with God, humans are able to learn about Him and “mirror” His image. In fact, the ability to have a two-way relationship with God is what makes humans unique among all creation. As Christians, we need to set aside the proper time to talk, think, and reflect with God. Even though He is always with us, in order to have a true relationship, we must spend time together, allowing us to develop an active faith that mirrors the Father and Spirit’s activity in our lives. While most people spend time with God in prayer, reading and studying God’s word is just as important because, through this, God reveals His true image and shows us how to live our lives in relationship with creation.

Another key element in an active relationship with God is the ability to ask questions and confide in God. One of the few things God wants from us is to love Him enough to confide in Him. After all, “How can you say, ‘I love you’, when you won’t confide in me?” (Judges 16:15 NIV). God wants us to pour our troubles, hopes, and doubts onto Him because *that* is what makes our faith active. In order to grow in our love of God, we need to ask those big questions of faith that seem unanswerable. By asking and searching for the answers, God reveals Himself to us. This is how we can mirror Jesus’ responsiveness to the Father. We take what we know and what God has revealed to us to form a decent explanation. People of faith across the globe respond to what God is doing in their lives, whether they know it or not. Our duty is to recognize and respond to God’s calling in our lives: to live in relationship with others.

Humans, being created in God’s image, are called to be in relationships with creation. This does not simply mean to love everyone and protect this earth and its resources. God is creating opportunities for us to reflect His image every day through personal relationships. In order to mirror the loving, active, responsive, and eternal image of God, humans need to make sacrifices. As the Apostle Paul said, “each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:4-5 NIV). Therefore, we as Christians need to focus on and serve others rather than ourselves. While serving and loving others can be done through mission work, it is crucial to recognize the importance of showing God’s love through everyday experiences. To actually mirror the life of Jesus, we need to rid ourselves of judgment, hatred, and revenge, leaving us rather open and vulnerable. This is risky behavior. Yet, to truly show God’s love, we need to take this risk in our relationships. After all, relationships are never easy; God created them to be complex. By asking for God’s help, people can conquer the feelings of vulnerability and truly love even their enemies.

Our relationships with others need to be active, just like our relationship with God. Relationships last only as long as one keeps them up. If I suddenly called a friend after not talking for 10 years, would there still be a relationship? There may be a slight one, but having a deep, meaningful relationship takes time and effort. Therefore, people must be active in their relationships by making time to sit down and talk or go out to lunch. God calls us to be proactive and, just like the Father initiates, initiate relationships. By doing so, we reveal God’s love and active presence to everyone.

Finally, not only do relationships need to be active, but they also need to be responsive. Throughout the course of a relationship, someone needs help dealing with a loss, a fight, or even just a minor dilemma. Again, in these cases we are called by God to lovingly and caringly respond and help. Instead of rushing to judge them by their mistake or looking for some sinister ulterior motive, we need to simply help them the best that we can. By responding with love and compassion, rather than hate, we are adopting and mirroring the attitude of Jesus Christ. God created us to be in relationship with one another and by mirroring His qualities we can show the world who God really is.

*Imago Dei!* We are created in the wonderful image of God! By examining the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the complexities of God are revealed. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in constant, interdependent relationships with one another. Being created in this image means we also need to live in

interdependent relationships in order to mirror and reflect God's image on the world. While Smail's metaphor of mirroring God is an effective way to understand how to live in a relationship, it is not fully representational of reality. We need to remember that relationships are two-sided. Unlike mirrors, we have to interact with others and respond to our environment. We simply use God's image in the mirror as a model to build our own relationships. I now know that when God looks in His mirror every morning He sees relationships, not just within Himself but also with people all across the world. I know God smiles at His reflection. That is the best image of all!

### **Sources**

*Life Application Study Bible*. New International Version. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers Inc, 1991.

Smail, Thomas A. "In the Image of the Triune God." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Volume 5, Number 1 (March 1993):22-32.

Sponheim, Paul R. *Speaking of God: Relational Theology*. St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2006.

# FINDING THE IMAGE OF GOD IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

*Amy Rahn, New Prague, MN*

The book of Esther is the only book of the Bible that never mentions God. Though the word Yahweh or God is not present at all in this book of the Bible, God is certainly present throughout it. God is present in Esther's bravery, Mordecai's loyalty to God, and through our belief in God's promises that we can find God where his name is not specifically mentioned. By picking apart this book of the Bible to find places where God was working, we can use those same skills to be able to find God in our everyday life. We can find him all around us where He is not specifically "labeled." Being that God is omnipresent He is everywhere, it just takes a closer look to find Him.

Esther, our main character of the story, was a brave young woman who changed the course of history. Hadassah, Esther's Jewish name, was orphaned at a young age and was taken in by her cousin Mordecai. In the later years of her life, King Xerxes banished the present queen, Vashti. All the eligible young ladies were brought to the castle for the king to find his new queen. Esther won his favor and became the new queen. She kept her Jewish identity a secret until the highest ranking official next to the king wanted to destroy all Jews. Esther was their only hope to be saved. The only way to petition to the king was for Esther to go to him un-summoned, which could have meant death for Esther. It took great courage for Esther with encouragement from Mordecai, and support with fasting of all of the Jews in surrounding areas for Esther to go before the king. Esther's love and care for her people pressed her on to do what she knew was right. One of the things that was stressed at Augsburg's Summer Theology Institute was "God is Love." Love, adoration, merciful, and caring are a few words used to describe God throughout the Bible. Esther models these words throughout her life and she responded to Mordecai, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:16, NIV).

Esther's first instinct when a challenge is set before her was to fast. When Mordecai told Esther that she must go before the king risking her life, Esther replied, "Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me ..." (Esther 4:16, NIV). Throughout scripture many times prayer comes with fasting. In Exodus when Moses was on the mountain he fasted while he got the commandments from the Lord (Exodus 34:28, NIV). When Ezra journeyed to Jerusalem, they prayed and fasted for a safe journey (Ezra 8:21-23, NIV). Fasting is something God has called his followers to do throughout the history of time and that fasting always came with some form of communication with God, prayer.

Mordecai was a willing servant of God. Mordecai knew God would save His chosen people; he expected it. In the Psalms, they would pray and expect God to hear them and answer (Psalm 5:3, 119:131, NIV). It also says in the book of Luke that a man named Simeon was a righteous man who was filled with the Holy Spirit and expected the Messiah to come (Luke 2:25, NIV). 1 Peter also states, "... now we live with a wonderful expectance because Jesus Christ rose again from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3, NIV). Expectance throughout the Bible has been a word for a strong belief or faith that God will do what He said He will do. Mordecai sent a message to Esther, "If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other place," (Esther 4:14, NIV). Believing Esther was part of God's plan to save the Jews, Mordecai tried to convince her to go before the king, but he knew if she did not the Jews would still be saved by God in a different way.

Mordecai was given many blessings beyond what he could have imagined later in his life. When Haman rose in power one of his perks was that the people of Persia, including others in command under him, would bow down to him in respect with all of his accomplishments and his position. Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman since the Jewish belief is to bow to no one but God. He also encouraged Esther throughout her struggle to persuade the king. After the entire story plays out, Mordecai is given his many blessings. "The king took off his signet ring which he had taken back from

Haman and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed Mordecai to be in charge of Haman's property," (Esther 8:2, NIV) and "Mordecai the Jew became the prime minister, with authority next to that of King Xerxes himself. He was very great among the Jews, who held him in high esteem, because he worked for the good of his people and was a friend at the royal court for all of them." (Esther 10:3, NIV). "If you fully obey the LORD your God by keeping all the commands I am giving you today, the LORD your God will exalt you above all the nations of the world. You will experience all these blessings if you obey the LORD your God," (Deuteronomy 28:1-2, NIV).

Haman, being against good, was punished for the things he did. When Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, Haman became furious and plotted revenge for Mordecai and all the Jews. Haman was an Amalekite, who had been enemies of the Jews all throughout history (1 Samuel 15, Exodus 17:16, Deuteronomy 25:17-19, NIV). Haman went to his gods and cast lots for the day when the Jews would be slaughtered and annihilated. Also following his wife's advice, Haman had built a 75-foot-tall gallows to have Mordecai hung on. After the second banquet Esther had for the king and Haman, she petitioned the king for her life as well as the lives of her people. She revealed to the king all of Haman's plans and the fact that she was a Jew herself. The king became enraged and had Haman hung on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai (Esther 7:10, NIV). They then wrote a new law saying the Jews could defend themselves in battle to destroy all of their enemies who would come after them on the day Haman had planned. The Persian word for lots is Purim, which became the name of the Jewish holiday that celebrates the deliverance of the Jews. "If you set a trap for others, you will get caught in it yourself." (Proverbs 26:27, NIV).

We can find God in His creation all around us. It is easier to sense His presence in the silence. During the week at Augsburg's Theology Institute we visited a peace garden in Minneapolis. When we arrived, we were instructed to walk through for a while in complete silence and meditation. You can see God in His beautiful trees He created or the massive sky filled with stars. You see Him in the tall mountains and the vast oceans. In the story of Elijah, he was waiting to see God and many big things happened—a mighty wind, an earthquake, and a fire. But it says God was not in the wind, or the fire, or the earthquake, but He was in the gentle whisper after all the disasters (1 Kings 19, NIV). Jesus, while on earth, would take time in the mornings away from his disciples to be in the silence, and to be with God. Believing our God is omnipresent, meaning everywhere, He is all around us no matter where we are, but we get caught up in this fast paced society and we tend to lose sight of Him. In seven days He created the heavens and the earth and you do not have to look very closely to be able to see Him in the creation he made.

God also made Adam and Eve, so we also reflect God as children of Adam and Eve. Though God is working through preachers, missionaries, and Sunday school teachers, He works through everyone who is willing, even in little acts of kindness. Jeremy Meyers, our professor at Augsburg, said, "when you open the door for someone, you are doing God's will because God calls us to love each other." Jesus said in a parable, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40, NIV). There are times when just a smile from someone on a really hard day can seem like a God-send. When someone gives something, it could be money, food, or even time, to someone in need even when it may be inconvenient for that person, we can see God working in that. Every person on this earth was made in God's own image, (Genesis 1:27, NIV) so when we are looking for God we need to look no further than a little girl who shares her cupcake, or the family who gives up their weekend to work at a food shelf, or someone with an explainable joy with nothing to be happy about.

God may not be mentioned in the book of Esther, but by what we know we can see His finger prints all over it. Through the book of Esther we can be encouraged that God has a plan for our lives, and that if we do His will and follow His commands we will be rewarded. We also know if we do evil, we will be punished. We all need to take time to be in the silence and spend time in prayer. We can see God in the beauty and the people around us. God is everywhere, you just need to slow down and take a closer look to find Him.

# FAITH LIKE A TUNNEL

*Amanda Brateng, Maple Grove, MN*

“A child, faith is like a child, taking it for granted miracles can be learning to believe in things it cannot touch or even see” (Fettke). This quote from Tom Fettke’s song, “Faith Is Like a Child,” is just a portion of how some people view their faith. Another view on faith is a “tunnel theme.” Faith can be like a tunnel. It leads you down paths unknown, but there is always light at the end. The American Heritage Dictionary defines faith as: 1) confident belief in the truth, value, or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing; 2) belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence; 3) a set of principles or beliefs. In the Bible, Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” How do we achieve faith? Is faith a gift or a choice? Can we trade in our faith for theology? Theology causes understanding, change, and growth in faith; it is not traded in for faith.

First, how do we achieve faith? This question is one that is puzzling and can have more than one answer. We grow in faith throughout our entire days on earth. In one situation we doubt and have faith until something big happens. For example, if your brother, who is dying of cancer, lives past the six-month marker the doctors gave him. Even from an event like this, faith becomes a factor in the man’s life and in the lives of his family members. Some people in that family may have not had faith to begin with, but it was found because of that situation. And the man may have found faith or had it all along.

In another situation, we can grow more and more in our faith. For example, imagine a woman who has gone to church her entire life and never experienced faith. This woman never really felt the Holy Spirit in her life. Then she decides to go on a mission trip or spend a weekend with friends from her church and things happen that are unexplainable. She sees what was right in front of her the whole time and it clicks in her head. She finally found faith, though it had always been there.

At times though, there are some people who just have faith in everything. They do not find it difficult to believe that God will provide. This faith is special, and it is one we should each try to achieve. For many, faith is a difficult subject; Jesus realized that and asked in the eighth chapter of Luke, “Where is your faith?” God understands the fact that we have difficulty trusting him. He has promised us everything by sending his son to die for our sins and us. Why should we fear? When he asks where our faith is, we should reply in a resounding, “In you!” Faith is found by having a relationship with God.

Second, is faith a gift or a choice? In the words of theologian Paul Sponheim, “Fundamentally it is a gift, but the tough issue is ... some people don’t seem to receive the gift” (Sponheim Lecture). God gives us faith by having a relationship with us. We do not have a choice whether or not we will be in a relationship with God. We just are. The thing is, we have to answer to the knock on our doorstep. We need to acknowledge that relationship. “The human self must recognize itself in the new knowledge and in the new affection and not in other affections” (Sponheim 75). We, as humans, must see ourselves as being in relationship with God and know that it is true. In this aspect, faith is more a gift but we must choose to accept it.

Now, there are times when it seems that faith is more of a choice than a gift. In the fourth chapter of Matthew, it says, “As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” This Bible story gives an example of faith being a choice. Both Simon Peter and Andrew could have easily not followed Jesus, but they chose to have faith and believe that it was something that they needed to do. They had no guarantees or promises of great things. They just chose to follow and have faith. Our faith journeys may be similar. We may not know where God is taking us or how He is working in our lives, but we do know that He is working. When we choose to follow, leave everything behind, and become his disciple, that is when faith is a choice.

Lastly, can we trade in our faith for theology? During the Summer Theology Institute, this question was brought up. It is a question that could be argued over or talked about for hours. The definition of theology is: 1) the study of the nature of God and religious truth; rational inquiry into religious questions; 2) a system or school of opinions concerning God and religious question: *Protestant Theology, Jewish Theology*; 3) a course of specialized religious study usually at a college or seminary” (American Heritage Dictionary). In studying theology, we are studying the nature of God. Now, it is good to know about the Maker, but we will never know everything. Our God is a mysterious and powerful God. He created everything and knows everything. It would be impossible for us to learn all there is to know about Him.

We know that we can never know everything; that is where faith comes into play. Faith believes, even it can't see God. This makes our relationship with God even stronger. Relationships involve trust; in order to have trust, you need to have faith in that person. You need to know that he or she will be there for you. So having faith in God builds trust in Him. That trust is like answering the knock on our door to a relationship with God and allows us to accept the gift that is and was present all along. In that faith and trust we are able to believe what we learn in studying theology. Theology helps us grow in our faith with God and helps us know that it is okay we don't understand. We can bring our questions to God and know that he will provide. Again, theology leads to faith. “God can handle our questions” (Myers). He knows that we are human beings who question things and who are curious. He put it into our minds and created us that way. He knows what questions we need to ask and which ones we don't. God knows our needs and will be there. He takes care of us in every situation. For example, *Footprints in the Sand* is a story about Jesus' walk with us and how he carries us through everything (Stevenson). God wants trust from us and helps build this trust with us by giving us theology and the ability to study Him. That theology and knowledge help create faith. That faith creates a relationship. That is what we long for: a relationship with God.

In conclusion we do not give up our faith for theology. Theology helps us on the pathway to building a strong, trusting relationship with God; a relationship that is omnipresent and forever willing. We may learn about God, but will never know everything. We may try to see God, but will not see everything. Not being and not seeing everything is what makes faith so wonderful. The fact that you can trust someone so much and know that they will be there and carry you through everything is a beautiful thing. God gives you a tunnel. The tunnel will not be completely dark, for God wants you to understand. Yet, the tunnel will not be completely light, for God wants you to trust in Him and know that he will show you the way. So enter the tunnel, trust in God, have faith and follow.

## Sources

- Dictionary.com The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 06 Jul. 2007. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Theology>>.
- Fettke, Tom. "Faith Is Like a Child." Praise Song. 1978.
- Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version Second Edition. Dallas, Texas: The Melton Book Company, 1901.
- Myers, Jeremy. Lecture. June 24-29, 2007.
- Sponheim, Paul R. Lecture. June 28, 2007.
- Sponheim, Paul R. Speaking of God. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2006.
- Stevenson, Mary. "Footprints in the Sand." 13 Aug 2007 <<http://www.llerrah.com/footprints.htm>>.

# DON'T FORGET ABOUT ME

## Fiction

*Samantha Masero, Beverton, OR*

She walked into her ninth grade choir class, hoping to see a familiar face, or at least a smiling one. As she stepped into the big, blue-painted metal doors, she spotted a blonde-haired girl who gave her a welcoming smile and gestured for her to come and sit next to her. As she made her way through the crowded seats, she sat down and said, "Hi, my name is Sophie. Thanks for letting me sit by you. I don't really know anyone here."

The blonde-haired girl responded, "Oh, no problem, I'm the 'new girl' too. This is my first time being in a public school. Oh, I'm Hope, by the way."

"Really? You have never been in a public school before?"

"No, my mom has home schooled me since, like, forever. My dad is a pastor at the church we go to, and our family is like, super involved."

"Oh that's cool, I go to church too. But I have always gone to public school. I have moved around so much, my dad's in the army."

"That must be hard."

"ATTENTION! Class!! Settle down, settle down," the choir teacher shouted. "Now I will call your name off this list, just say 'here' if you are here."

"Well, we can talk more later, Sophie. If you have second lunch we can eat together after this."

"Okay, sounds good to me."

After lunch the girls compared schedules and noticed they didn't have any more classes together, but still stuck with each other.

Over the next few weeks they got to know each other very well, having sleepovers every Friday, spending time with each others' families. Hope had nine brothers and sisters, and Sophie had only one younger brother.

One night at Hope's house they were discussing their faiths when Sophie asked, "Hey Hope, do you ever think about the future and wonder if there really is going to be a place for us later in life? Like when we are in college, do you think our faith will be as strong? I like to think that I will praise God even more, but as high school goes on I can't help but doubt that God will be there."

"I know, totally, what you're talking about, but my dad has told me God is always there, when you want him to be, when you want nothing to do with him. He will be waiting for you, because he loves you. It took me a while to understand, but when I saw how my sister was searching so much for God, looking in all the wrong places, I knew he was right."

"What do you mean about your sister?"

"I don't know, she just makes mistakes, but doesn't take action in fixing them. She likes to party a lot. We talk about it, she knows it's wrong ... but can't seem to stop."

"Oh, yeah, I meant those kinds of things, but other ones too. Like when my dad isn't home, and my mom is working, or at school when that one girl gets made fun of for something dumb. I try to stand up for her, but end up feeling like a fool. I just can't help but care what other people think."

"I don't really know what to say, maybe you should pray about it. Hey Soph, How do you see God? Like if you were to describe him what would you say?"

"To me God is indescribable. You see all these images of Him everywhere. Him and Jesus. As if they are opposite, God being portrayed as the angry one who will come down on you for anything, and Jesus as your best buddy. It's just frustrating because I know that not only is God an angry God, but loving as well. He sent his only son for us, for you and me, Hope, for the world. That is so incredible to me."

“I have never really thought of it like that before, I have kind of just stuck to what I was told. So that’s why I asked. But I am getting sleepy, let’s talk about this more some time okay?”

“All right. Night, Hopey.”

“Night.”

The months were going by faster, freshman year over half way done. Hope had a boyfriend for about a month or so, and Sophie just ended her three month relationship last week. The girls were outside Hope’s house pushing each other on the swing in the front yard. The day was beautiful, skies clear blue, the grass a vibrant green, and the sun giving a warm glow on the earth below.

“Hey Soph, why do you think you have moved so much, besides the obvious reason of your dad being in the army? You have changed schools a lot, does that bum you out?”

“Naw, not really. Well not anymore. It used to bug me a lot, but I think I have realized why I have so much.”

“Well go on, Soph, haha.”

“Well don’t laugh or call me super religious or anything. But I think it’s because God wanted me to get a chance to see things that people wouldn’t normally, living in one place their whole lives. Like getting to know all different kinds of people, being a part of their lives, and maybe making a difference. But it isn’t me that is making the difference, its God working through me, helping people maybe.”

“Well yeah, I could see that. You are a good listener and people trust you—not a lot of people trust people right away, but I think you’re right, God gave you a gift, girl.”

“Ha ha, my other theory is that God wanted to show me how much I have. I have parents who work hard to provide for me and my brother, who love me unconditionally. I have a family that even though we fight, we stick together, or since we move so much God wanted us to be there for each other and depend on Him.”

“That’s what I struggle with, depending on Him. I always seem to forget what should come first. Like I have to be in control, and sometimes I just wish it would be as easy as it sounds to hand over my life and give complete control to Him. But it’s hard.”

“Totally, you know what, Hope? I have never had a friend like you, that I can talk to about this kind of stuff. Like my religion and what I believe without my ideas or opinions being shot down. You have no idea how thankful I am to have you as a friend.”

“Me too, Soph.”

It was the last week of school and Sophie found out, she was moving again, but this time it was a place she had lived before. So at least she wouldn’t have to completely start over again. She told Hope as soon as she found out and they had talked all throughout the week about it, and what week she would be moving.

“Well, I am moving in two weeks, Hope.”

“Really? That soon? That isn’t fair! Not at all. What the heck, Sophie? We’ve become such good friends! You’re my best friend. What am I going to do when you’re gone next year? Who am I going to be able to come to when I have questions about God and what to believe? Where am I going to go when I need a place to just sit and relax and vent?”

“It’s okay, Hope ... I don’t know how to answer that, but we will figure it out. Let’s just pray about it, okay?”

“I think that’s all we can do right now.”

Moving day came and Hope was at Sophie’s house helping load up the rest of the boxes on the truck. Neither of the girls were talking much, but Sophie had to give Hope something.

“Hey Hope ... I wrote you something ... here you go.”

She handed her a piece of notebook paper folded in two. Hope opened it and read the following:

*Tears fall softly down her crimson cheeks  
Emotions emerging  
Bursting forth with unknown power  
She cries out to Him  
Longing for what she is missing  
Wholeness,  
She falls to her knees  
No longer empty  
But fulfilled  
Thanking her God for she has a second chance  
To live  
To love  
To praise  
She rises to her feet  
With a humble whisper  
“Thank you”  
And walks to where she belongs.*

“It’s supposed to give you something to look forward to, for when you find yourself looking and searching like your sister was. With different circumstances, though, you know?”

“Wow Sophie ... I ... I don’t know what to say. I mean, I know you’re always going to be there for me, even though there are 1,000 miles separating us physically. You will always be with me. And I know I can still call on you. Maybe like you said for you, this is my time to depend on him and figure out what I need and want in my relationship with God. Maybe this is my time to get my image of Him straight. How He wants me to see Him, let Him show me what I need ... you know?”

“I know you’re right ...”

“SOOOOPHIIIIIEEEE,” her dad called. “It’s that time, we’re leaving now.”

“Okay dad; be there in a second!!” Sophie replied.

“Well I guess this is it, Hope.”

“Sophie, I am not going to say goodbye, because that would make this feel like the end, so I think I am just going to say, see you later.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The girls hugged, and parted both with tears in their eyes, faces swollen red and trying not to look back. Hope was driven home by her mom who came to pick her up. Sophie and her dad climbed into the truck that carried their stuff, with her mom and brother in the compact car following behind, they left for the freeway. Driving to wherever God had planned for them next.

# BREAKING DOWN THE STEREOTYPES

*Marrta Wyatt, Bethel, MN*

When asked why they don't go to church, many will say that it is too boring and stiff, or that God is only for those good enough, perfect enough, or those who have it all together and know all the answers. Others might say that the people at church are fake and not real with each other. Still others say there is no meaning in the services and going to church is just an obligation that needs to be filled.

It is because of these stern, unloving, and uncaring images of God and the Church that many people turn away from the thing that Christians want them to turn towards most—a relationship with the Savior, Jesus Christ. It is not just “non-believers” that struggle with these ideas and images; many Christians also struggle with these misconceptions. The key is to struggle with and address them and then continue on in the journey with Christ. The Church as a whole needs to find a way to break down these stereotypes so people will be more open to the Good News of Jesus Christ. We need to redefine the image of God that the Church portrays.

A large majority of people think that worship services are completely boring and repetitive. This is probably one of the most widely believed myths of the Church. There are many different ways to worship. One can worship through almost anything as long as he or she has the right intentions and gives the activity to God. At the Summer Theology Institute, participants worshiped in many different and unique ways. There were more traditional worship services with hymns, communion, and a sermon, but there were also nights when the worship service was playing games and having fun in God's name, or making new paper by recycling old paper in order to become good stewards of what God has given us. Worship can also be singing or playing instruments. It all depends on one's individual style and personality. A person must search and discover the ways he or she worships God. One must find his or her worship style; the Church can't do it for him or her, and blame should not be put on the Church for not meeting every individual's specific needs. However, the Church does need to help introduce individuals to different styles of worship. The responsibility for discovering worship styles is put on both parties; each must do its part to help. Everyone needs to realize that there are many different ways to worship and there are exciting opportunities for everyone to worship in their own ways. Only when this realization occurs, will the image of boring worship be destroyed.

The belief that God is only for the spiritually or emotionally strong also keeps some people away from church. But when a person thinks about it, it is easy to see this idea is very untrue. If only the people who are perfect could go to church, then there would be no church. No one on this planet is truly good enough for God. It is only through God's love and grace that we are saved. Without God's grace, we would all be completely lost. The Bible says in Romans that “it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works” (Romans 11:6 NRSV). Paul is saying that because of Jesus, people don't have to be perfect to go to heaven; we are instead saved by grace. A person does not need to be perfect to be a Christian either, only repentant and thus, forgiven. This shows that God is truly a loving and caring God because God cares for us so much that God has mercy on us and gives us grace, even though we sin against God.

Only God knows all the answers to life's questions and yet, some people think they have to know everything to be involved in church. Again, if this was true, there would be a very small group of church-goers. In fact, answering questions about God, Christianity, and the Bible actually leads to many more questions than answers. In *Velvet Elvis*, Rob Bell shows a wonderful example of the questions the Bible can raise. He takes a simple verse from Leviticus about loving our neighbors and shows how many questions it can raise: “How do we live this verse out? What does it mean to love? What isn't love? Who decides what is love and what isn't love? And what about your neighbor? (45)” People must ask these important questions in order to figure out what they think about certain verses in the Bible and the Bible as a whole.

One of the main parts of being a Christian is asking questions and being okay with not always finding definite answers. It is when we cannot find those definite answers that faith comes in. Christians must have faith that God is in control and that God has a plan for everything. One must not become discouraged because of the seeming lack of answers, but instead keep questioning, learning, discovering, and going deeper. Questioning is a very necessary part of being a Christian and trying to live according to Christian beliefs because that questioning helps us grow in our relationships with God. Generally, the deeper a person goes in learning about God, the more accurate that person's image of God will be because he or she is deepening that relationship with God.

As with all things involving people interacting, some people within the Church can be fake or uncaring people. But when Christians truly open up to one another, strong relationships can form. When people are willing to talk about their darkest moments, others who are listening can help them. These conversations are likely to happen in a safe, "God-filled" place. I have been to many youth gatherings where people come together and talk about their struggles and are real with each other. When a person shares these struggles with a Christian, that Christian can help the other person to see God in his or her situation. These people ask the tough questions: "Where was God when I was going through that?" or "Why did God let that happen?" And even if they don't find the answers to these questions, these people are struggling, working, and growing together in their relationships with God and with each other. These are relationships where one friend can call another and ask for help, the other friend gives it, and it is all centered on God. It all starts in the church community where God is making broken, hurting humans whole again through relationships. This also shows how caring God really is because God cares about all human beings and makes those relationships available so a person does not go through tough times alone.

One other misconception is that going to church is an obligation that must be filled in order to get to heaven. This is something that is often felt by many people. Sometimes, a person just doesn't want to get up on a Sunday morning and sit on a hard bench for an hour, especially when that person does not realize (or forgets) the magnitude of God. This is such a sad, but true, occurrence. Jesus Christ died a horrible death on a cross so we didn't have to; so we could be with God instead of being eternally separated from God. This gift of salvation is the greatest gift one could ever receive. We as humans can so easily forget that and so, grudgingly, drag ourselves to church to say a half-hearted "thank you" to the Creator of the world for saving and caring for us. Believers need to remember this gift and let it consume us, and then we will realize, or remember, that we *get* to worship God, we don't *have* to. Worship is our opportunity to thank God not only for the gift of Jesus, but also for the everyday blessings we receive. What we must constantly remember is that even worship is a gift from God because we get to connect with God. When people think of worship as an obligation, instead of a gift, it hurts the image of God because people will only do it grudgingly and half-heartedly.

The image of God and the image of church that Christians portray is sometimes not a very accurate one. Sometimes church is thought of as boring or God is thought to be only for certain, select people. Others have problems with the kind of people they think go to church, while still others think there is no reason to go to church because it is just a requirement. The image that has been created is hurting the Church. People who believe these stereotypes don't generally want to be involved with the Church. It is up to the worldwide Church to dispel these myths in order to bring more people to church. It is not about mere numbers, but it is about people having a relationship with God for all eternity. It will be hard to break down the stereotypes, but it needs to be done in order to keep the Christian faith alive and growing. Churches and Christians everywhere need to take a long look in order to see what they can do to stop these myths from spreading anymore.

An attitude change is what is needed most in the Church. If more Christians get excited about church and talk positively about it, the problem of these stereotypes would be well on its way to being solved. The most effective way to get rid of these stereotypes though, is for Christians to give themselves away in radical acts of service and compassion, expecting nothing in return, [this is] the way Jesus is

most vividly put on display” (Bell 167). Non-believers need to see people fired up for God, committing these acts of service, in order to see what the Church is truly about. These people need to see Jesus and Christians can show them who Jesus is. If the world sees more of these Christians and more of Jesus, maybe, just maybe, more people will become Christians and the image of a loving, caring God can be restored.

### **Sources**

Bell, Rob. *Velvet Elvis; Repainting the Christian Faith*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005

*The HarperCollins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version. New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1993

# BEYOND TOLERANCE: EMBRACING OUR RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

*Mari Feld, Rosemount, MN*

The religious landscape in America is rapidly changing as we are entering the 21st century. People from all over the world are bringing new ideas, customs, traditions, and religious beliefs to our country. In 2005 the population of Muslims in America was about six million. The followers of Judaism have about equal numbers in the U.S., and Hinduism and Buddhism are also growing religions ([www.usa.usembassy.org](http://www.usa.usembassy.org)). As Christians, how are we to respond to the diverse beliefs in our society? Should we be indifferent? accepting? tolerant? There are books, articles, and websites devoted to the idea of religious tolerance. All of these gestures are very well-intentioned, but the word “tolerance” itself is problematic, because of the disinterested attitude it can convey. Harvard religion professor Diana L. Eck says that “Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about each other” ([www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org)). When I hear the word “tolerance,” I imagine one side saying warily to the other, “You do your thing and I’ll just stay over here and do mine.” My argument is that to be able to interact in our pluralistic society, we need to go beyond simple tolerance and establish within ourselves a deep understanding and respect for other religious traditions. The word “tolerance” does nothing to further our understanding of our religious society.

In *Speaking of God*, Dr. Paul Sponheim says that “the holy place to which Christians must travel is the world,” and that, as Christians, “we do and must speak of God” (p.1). How can we do this without the risk of offending non-Christians, or abandoning our own faith? I believe our choices go beyond these two options. In the Hindu tradition there is a Sanskrit word, *namaste*, which means *The Light of God in me recognizes and honors the Light of God in you and in that recognition is our Oneness* ([www.namaste.org](http://www.namaste.org)). This is exactly what a deep religious understanding can do for us—it can allow us to honor the other, while not leaving our own spiritual identities behind us. We can find common ground and unity in our love of God.

The first step towards religious understanding, I think, is to get God out of the box humans have unknowingly put Him into. Diana Eck, in her book *Encountering God* says that “Whatever we may think of God, the referent of that word, that symbol, is a mystery. God is finally out of our grasp. God is not ours—even with the grace of God’s revealing” (p. 46).

She is making the crucial point that God is God; God is bigger than the human idea of religions, sects, and denominations. God transcends all of that. Religion is our attempt to pull God out of the sky and give a definition—to put God in a box. In the Bible, the psalmist talks about the mystery of God, saying that “His greatness is beyond our understanding” (Psalms 145:3, TEV). Another way to look at it is through the lens of Islam. While I was at the Summer Theology Institute at Augsburg College, our professor, Jeremy Myers, mentioned how deeply the Islamic tradition recognizes the infinite nature of God. When Muslims speak of God, they have “a hundred-minus-one” names for God. According to the teachings of Islam, the 99 names for God are the most that humanity can achieve—there will always be that hundredth name that we cannot quite articulate. Sponheim states briefly that “the God who is present is not my private deity” (p.31). If we say that God is present only within the spectrum of Christianity, that “pins God down,” and limits what we think God can do. If we understand that God’s greatness works throughout the world’s various traditions, we will have a solid foundation for religious understanding.

But does this mean that the Islamic God is the same thing as the Christian God? Or, could it be that each god is an interpretation of the same being according to the range of contexts in which that being was encountered? In his book *One River, Many Wells*, Episcopalian priest Matthew Fox states that when it comes to the religions of the world, “We find that in their core and depth we do not encounter many religions so much as one experience that is expressed variously and with great diversity and color flowing in the name of different traditions and cultures” (p.3).

As Sponheim said, God is present to all. He adds that we must “avoid the dangerous presumption that we are delivering God to a God-less world” (p.127). During the Summer Theology Institute at Augsburg College, Myers extended this idea by saying that “God has a relationship with everybody, whether we choose to acknowledge this or not.” The idea of a God for and with everyone is helpful, because it breaks down the barriers of “us” and “them.” If we look at the world this way, we see that we are all people of God. In the New Testament the Apostle Paul illustrates that the people of God are like one body, with many members: if one part of that body is missing, the whole body suffers. Paul says that “God put every different part in the body just as he wanted it to be. There would not be a body if there were only one part!” (1 Corinthians 12:18-19, TEV).

If we can see God working in and through everyone, it’s easier to understand and respect another religious tradition, and also makes it possible to talk about God with others.

The difficulty some Christians have with this idea of a “bigger God,” a God present to all religions, is that it brings up the question, “What makes Christianity the right way? What makes it the true way?” First we have to ask ourselves what we mean by “true?” From what I’ve observed, most people mean “truth” by what has been said about God in religious scriptures. What we must remember is that everything that has ever been said or written about God has been said by finite creatures—humans. In the book *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg notes that the Bible is “a product of two ancient communities,” ancient Israel and the very first Christian people. “What the Bible says is the words of those communities, not God’s words” (p.22). This doesn’t make the Bible any less powerful or important, but, because of our finitude and because of the many contexts in which God has been encountered, I don’t think it could be possible for there to be one exclusively true set of statements about God. As Sponheim says, “We must recognize our deeply rooted relativity in a particular time and place ... We cannot speak for everyone” (p.5).

This does not mean, however, that each religion will hold equal truth for everyone. Every person’s idea of truth is different. God made each of us unique, and we all reason things out in different ways, and sometimes we disagree. It would be unrealistic to expect every single person to find “truth” in the exact same place. Howard Thurman touches on this:

There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the “angel with the flaming sword.” Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of your inner approval.

We cannot hold something as truth if we cannot place it on that altar. I don’t expect myself to fully agree with every single point of another religion, and thankfully this isn’t required to be truly understanding of another’s faith. What we must do is go back to the “bigger God,” a God present to all. This can establish a respect within us that will allow us to say, “This other religion holds truth for somebody; if not me, then somebody.” This acknowledges God’s wholly infinite nature, and shows us that God always has something greater to teach us. Seeking out the many truths of God as they are expressed in different religions will deepen our respect not only of those religions, but will also enhance our understanding of God.

To increase our understanding and respect of another’s religion, most would agree that it’s necessary to learn something about that religious tradition and how it views, talks about, and worships

God. In my explorations, I have noticed that other traditions are much more appreciative of the plurality in our world, rather than uneasy or apprehensive. For instance, in the Qu'ran we read that

We believe in Allah and in that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and his children and that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and that which was given to all the other prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them and to him we wholly submit ourselves.

People within the Buddhist tradition hold similar views. In his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh says that, "To me, religious life is life. I do not see any reason to spend one's whole life tasting just one kind of fruit. We human beings can be nourished by the best values of many traditions" (p.2). There are some voices within Christianity that embrace this deep understanding of God and religion as well. Howard Thurman says, "It is my belief that in the Presence of God there is neither male nor female, white nor black, Gentile nor Jew, Protestant nor Catholic, Hindu, Buddhists, nor Muslim, but a human spirit stripped to the literal substance of itself before God."

Likewise, Matthew Fox states, "There is one underground river—but there are many wells into that river: a Taoist well, a Buddhist well, a Jewish well, a Muslim well, a goddess well, a Christian well, and an aboriginal well. Many wells, but one river" (p.5).

And even from the Bible. In the New Testament, Peter speaks about God's relationship to us. "I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Those who fear him and do what is right are acceptable to him, no matter what race they belong to" (Acts 10:34-35, TEV). Several verses later Peter acknowledges also that God works throughout the world, "It is clear that God gave those Gentiles the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord; who was I, then, to try to stop God!" (Acts 11:17, TEV). Paul later writes to the Corinthians, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, NRSV).

God has given his people the ability to embrace these differences in each other, and given us the chance to find common ground. I think that when we practice religious understanding, we're not only seeking our knowledge for ourselves and expanding our personal faith, but we're also being a symbol of hope in God's world. Religious understanding can open lines of dialogue; it could restore trust and hope to countries torn over religious differences; and at its very core religious understanding would open our hearts and minds, allowing God to show us the magnificent diversity of his people. We may worship him, talk about him, and think about him in different ways and in different languages, but these are small things compared with the greatness of God.

## Sources

- Borg, Marcus J. *Reading the Bible again for the First Time*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Eck, Diana L. *Encountering God*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, 2003.
- . The Pluralism Project [http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/what\\_is\\_pluralism.php](http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism.php)
- Fox, Matthew. *One River, Many Wells*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2000.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. New York: Riverhead, 1995.
- Khan, Muhammad Zafrulla, trans. *The Qu'ran*. New York: Olive Branch Press, 1997.
- Myers, Jeremy. Lecture. Summer Theology Institute. Augsburg College. Minneapolis, Minn. 27 June 2007.
- Sponheim, Paul. *Speaking of God*. Chalice Press, 2006.
- Thurman, Howard. *Meditations of the Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1981.
- . *The Creative Encounter*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1972.
- <http://usa.usembassy.de/society-religion.htm>
- <http://www.namaste.org/namaste/>

# THE FATE OF ATHEISTS

*Eric Christenson, International Falls, MN*

The cries and screams of grown men could be heard from across the lake. The man, sitting on the dock of his island house, saw two dark specs in the snow-coated, barely frozen lake. Two men had been hunting out on the lake, and the ice that had formed was cutting the sides of the boat and it was sinking. Without any regard for his own safety, the man on the dock grabbed a canoe and began to walk across the thin ice. As he got further out on to the lake, the ice under his own feet got thinner and began to crack. He climbed into his canoe and paddled and pushed himself the rest of the way to the sinking boat. He pulled the wet and freezing men out of the lake and into his canoe. With that, he headed for the lights on the shore of the mainland.

This is a true story. I know this man. He is very kind and helpful—he even went so far as to risk his own life to save others. Yet I also know that he is, more or less, an atheist. Can people who do God's work but don't believe in God be granted eternal life? This essay will attempt to prove they can.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the last of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Matthew 25:31-40, NRSV).

People often are doing God's work, but don't realize it. However, they are still accepted into the kingdom. This means that atheists who are kind and helpful can also be granted eternal life.

Matthew 5:31-40 also strongly encompasses the idea that good deeds are worth as much as faith. The people in the passage were merely helping other random people, not knowing that they were pleasing God, but just the deeds that they did pleased Him enough to welcome them into His Kingdom. This can also apply to people like the man in the opening story.

An important point to discuss is whether faith is a gift or a choice. If we say faith is a gift, then an atheist's disbelief in God would not be his or her fault, because he or she didn't receive the gift of faith. If we say faith is a choice, then fault lies with the person, because he or she chose not to believe in God. In a discussion with systematic theologian Paul Sponheim, when asked if faith was a gift or a choice, he responded with “Yes,” meaning that it is both. This would then mean that an atheist's disbelief in God would be partly his or her fault, but the blame doesn't lie completely with the individual. Now, obviously there are plenty of passages and other pieces of evidence that would suggest that atheists can't be granted eternal life, good deeds or not. However, Sponheim also tells us something else.

“Love is the category proper by which all other descriptions of God must be judged” (Sponheim 24). Despite the fact that there are plenty of other passages in the Bible that would completely contradict Matthew 5, the category proper of love must be accounted for. While it would not be wise to disregard descriptions of a wrathful or vengeful God, they hold less sway than those depicting God operating on the premises of love.

Still another point is the existence (and/or the form) of Hell. Is it a geographical location that overly sinful people go to after death? Is it filled with fire and endless pain and suffering? Is Hell just a state of mind? Perhaps it is a personal thing that people create for themselves while on Earth. That is to say, do people create their own hells by sinning? If that were the case, then every human would have endured Hell by the time they died, and ultimately, everyone would be granted eternal life, even atheists.

“But I have said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should love nothing of all that he have given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6: 36-40 NRSV).

God wants all the people of the Earth to come back to Him, this including those who don't even believe in Him. These verses also abide by the category proper of love—that is, everything God does—He does in love. God made all people, so can't we logically conclude that He loves all of us and wants us to be with Him? Surely it is within His power to bring us all back to Him, even those of us who contradict His will the most. If He wants to be with everyone, then that would include atheists, especially atheists who perform good deeds.

In conclusion, atheists who do God's work (whether or not they know it) can be granted eternal life. Matthew 5: 31-40 shows that deeds are worth as much as faith, even if they aren't being done in the name of God. Although there could be numerous pieces of evidence saying otherwise, God's love causes Him to want to welcome as many people as possible into His Kingdom.

### Sources

Sponheim, Paul. *Speaking of God*. St. Louis Missouri: Chalice Press, 2006.

# 1 + 1 + 1 = 1, EXPLAINING THE TRINITY

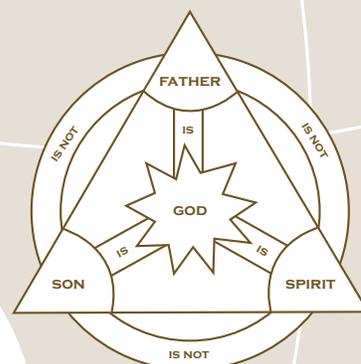
Maddie Jensen, Minneapolis, MN

During my week at the Summer Theology Institute, we explored many different topics that were not only brought up in the book, *Speaking of God*, by Paul Sponheim, but also during class discussions lead by Professor Jeremy Myers. One topic that was discussed in class was the Trinity: all three equal components make one God. Following the 2007 Summer Theology Institute's theme *Imago Dei*, I will be looking at how Christians try to explain the Trinity, how we use the Bible to show that while the Trinity is never used in the Bible, it is, rather, implied.

When looking for information on how Christians explain their beliefs about the Trinity, the Athanasian Creed provides many examples. This creed was named after the Bishop of Alexandria, but there is no evidence that he actually wrote the creed. The Athanasian Creed reads, "We worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine being." The creed continues to make it very clear that while each of the three is his own person, "the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory, coeternal in majesty." The Athanasian Creed continues to explain how while there are three parts they make up one God. "Thus the Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God: And yet there are not three gods, but one God." Simply put, "all three persons are in themselves, coeternal and coequal; and so we must worship the Trinity in unity and the one God in three persons." The symbol included in this page is a good example of how the Trinity works.

Supporting the doctrine of the Trinity is known as Trinitarianism. Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament uses the term "Trinity," though Trinitarians believe the concept is implied in various biblical passages. The first passage is from the book of Matthew, "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:16-17, NIV). I think that this provides a good example of God's attributes. The second passage is from 2 Corinthians, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14, NIV). This supports the belief of the Trinity because it shows more than one element of God and how these elements relate. The third passage is from the book of Luke, "The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God'" (Luke 1:35, NIV). That passage makes people think about the Trinity in a more visual way. It's easy to envision what the angel was saying. This last passage is from the book of John: "But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 10:38, NIV). This passage shows how the "Father is in me, and I in the Father."

Grasping the concept of the Trinity is hard because you have to understand that the Father + the Son + the Holy Spirit = one God and not three gods. The Bible has many passages that support Trinitarian belief. These passages show the different aspects of the Trinity, such as that the "Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35, NIV). While the Athanasian Creed gives one of the most concrete explanations about how the Trinity is comprised, it helps to have passages from the Bible to support what the Creed is explaining.



## Sources

"Athanasian Creed." ELCA.org. ELCA. 28 Jun 2007. <http://www.elca.org/communication/creeds/athanasian.html>.

*Holy Bible*, New International Version (NIV). Copyright 1984 by International Bible Society.

"Trinitarianism." Gotquestions?org. Got Questions. 10 Aug 2007. <http://www.gotquestions.org/printer/trinitarianism-pf.html>.

# SEEING GOD

*Andrew Papke-Larson, Bemidji, MN*

God is not always easy to see or find. God can be standing right in front of us and we can still turn and walk away. God is everywhere and God is always with us. We should keep our faith and trust in God even when we can't seem to find God.

Albert North Whitehead, a mathematician and philosopher said, "Sometimes we see an elephant, and sometimes we don't. The result is that an elephant, when present, is noticed" (Quoted in Sponheim, 4). Contemporary theologian Paul Sponheim follows up on Whitehead by saying "We always notice what stands out, what is present now, but not before. That which is always present escapes our notice" (18). God is always with us but that doesn't mean God can easily be seen. Everyone has trouble seeing God.

I went on a canoeing trip to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, on the border between Minnesota and Ontario, with my dad. The whole week was very windy. One day we went out to fish and a gust of wind came up and flipped the canoe. It took us a while to get all of our stuff back into the canoe and push it to shore. We were not making much progress and after awhile I started getting tired. Some people from a nearby campsite noticed us and canoed over to help. They pulled us to shore and then helped us get back to camp. When we got there they helped us make a fire and then made sure that we were all right.

At first I didn't see God in this act at all but as I sat at the campfire I realized how much the people had helped us and how God had been shown to us through them. It took me a while to see this obvious act of God. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor death, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39 NRSV).

I thought a lot about this while I attended the Summer Theology Institute. The majority of my day outside of camp is not spent thinking about God. I go to church on Sunday and I pray before I eat food but I don't constantly think of God; however, God is always thinking of us. God is there when we watch a movie, eat, or go to work. I think it can be hard to see God because God is always there. We need to learn how to look and see God's acts of love so that we can copy them. I am not going to go to the Boundary Waters and wait for someone to flip their canoe so that I can help them, but I can recycle bottles of water to help protect the environment, volunteer at a homeless shelter to help those in need, or be a good role model for little kids.

Even though God is always present, it can be hard to see that God loves us. God is always present and God will not leave us alone.

## Sources

Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. New York: Free Press, 1929. 4.  
Sponheim, Paul. *Speaking of God: Relational Theology*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006. 18.

# SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND THE QUESTION OF CREATION

*Julia M. Schiefelbein, Fall Creek, WI*

One of the most difficult issues facing Christians today is that of creation in light of evolution. A literal reading of the book of Genesis is not a satisfactory account of our beginnings for most and hasn't been since the 1860s when Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*. Today, more and more scientific research, such as the Human Genome Project, supports evolution. To solve this problem, some people resolve to simply ignore the contradictions of the Bible and modern science. Still others argue that science and religion inhabit two different and completely separate spheres, and so any disagreement between them is irrelevant. However, for many Christians, some sort of an answer or reconciliation is needed; the gaps in both the religious and scientific theories are large. Religion and science can supplement each other to form a more complete theory on the beginning of our world and the ongoing creation process while not sacrificing any respective principles.

Contrary to what many people and organizations say, there is a spectrum along which the beliefs of creation fall. Often it seems as if one can be either a Christian or a person of science, but not both. For the sake of clarity and conciseness, this paper will only address a few of the larger and more well-known divisions. *Creationism*, at one end of the spectrum, is a literal interpretation of the Bible's creation story. It holds that the Earth was created in one week consisting of twenty-four-hour days, and that God created all life in forms as they exist today. *Intelligent Design* (ID) maintains that a superior being is essential to orchestrate the creation plan because of the complexity of nature. It claims that "intelligent causes are necessary to explain the complex, information-rich structures of biology and that these causes are empirically detectable" (Dembski 106). *Natural Theology* holds that God can be witnessed in the creation around us by human reason (reason does not replace faith and grace), and can establish certain truths that are common to all people. In Donovan Hall's "The Scope of Natural Theology" he explains this theory: "The importance of natural theology is that it acts to form our conception of God. It moves from what we know to be fact about the natural world and decides between various theories of God" (Hall). *Theistic Evolutionists*, also known as Evolutionary Creationists, fully accept mainstream evolution but consider it the work of God. *Naturalists*, at the other end of this spectrum, believe that there is no God or higher being and that humans evolved from bacteria millions of years ago. Among these five divisions there are many smaller factions.

The evidence for evolution is now nearly irrefutable. Darwin's predictions and conclusions made more than 150 years ago have largely been supported and confirmed by present-day science. Fossil records of various organisms show the similarities of species and allow biologists and geologists to draw clear conclusions of ancestral lines. Homologous structures in animals also provide evidence of common ancestors. For example, many whales still have small hip bones, suggesting that they descended from land animals and slowly evolved into the animals we recognize today. Mentioned before, the Human Genome Project found that humans are very genetically similar to other organisms and do not have as many genes as previously thought, suggesting that humans are not any more complex than other animals. For example, we share many of the same genes with the fruit fly. All of this evidence can seem overwhelming and can leave many Christians wondering, "If this is all true, where does the Bible fit in?"

The evolution argument may not be as airtight as it seems. At various points in the earth's history it seems as if a new species appears without any apparent ancestors. The appearance in creation of a genuinely new organism is called emergence. Emergence is one of the arguments that has stumped the scientific community. Even more problematic for evolution is the basic question of how life began. Presently, naturalists argue that the first life was the result of an inorganic chemical reaction. However,

they also claim that life cannot spontaneously occur, a staple in the theory of evolution and in Darwin's theory of natural selection. Christians argue that God can create out of nothing. Genesis 1:2-3; 26a-27 (NRSV) says this about creation out of nothing:

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Then God said, "Let us make humankind" ... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

For many people the major problem with the strictly scientific theory of evolution is that it doesn't answer the deeper questions of life. Why were we put on this earth? What is our purpose now that we are here? A satisfying answer is not, "It is a pure coincidence that humans exist and that the world exists, and there is no purpose to any of it." There are some questions that science simply cannot answer. This is where our religion comes into play.

Scientists discovered the earliest evidence of religion in present-day Botswana, which dates back more than 70,000 years (Minkel). Since then, people have been relying on their religion to support them through difficult times, to be with them in daily life, and to give thanks for blessings and miracles. Clearly, if religion has withstood the test of time for thousands of years, there must be something to it. Today, approximately two billion people identify Christianity as their faith, and about 85% of people throughout the world claim to be religious ("Major Religions of the World"). So what proof do we have of our religion?

One example of proof in Christianity we do have is the fulfillment of the prophecies through Jesus Christ. During His life and ministry Jesus realized hundreds of prophecies stated in the Old Testament of the Bible. Skeptics may ask, "How do we know the authors of the Bible didn't just write in all of these fulfillments of prophecy or rewrite some of the prophecies to match Jesus' actions?" The Dead Sea Scrolls, found between 1947 and 1956 in 11 caves along the Dead Sea, provide us with evidence of the authenticity of Jesus as our Savior. With carbon dating, scientists have established the age of the manuscripts, with some of the scrolls dating to 100 B.C., about 100 years before Jesus came to Earth. These certain scrolls contain many prophecies within scripture that were fulfilled by Jesus. This is just one illustration of scientific proof of the presence of Jesus Christ and the authenticity of his actions (Justin).

For many Christians, however, their claim to this religion does not lie on scientific evidence but on faith as a gift from God. Personally, looking around myself at the wonder of creation and at my family and friends, I know there must be some higher power with us. There must be something waiting for us after death. I have experienced a few deeply religious occurrences and have felt the pull of God urging me to do something or go somewhere. I know in my heart that God is present. People all over the world have had similar experiences to mine and would make similar claims based on faith, even if their religion may not be Christianity.

Now back to the creation problem. With so many different theories, which one can we claim to be most correct? Creationism ignores evolution and the age of the earth as scientifically established. Many of its points are in direct conflict with what science tells us today. It would be extremely difficult for a Christian to be a creationist while accepting the evidence of evolution. Also, even when ignoring the scientific world, the creationist theory is in conflict with itself. There are two separate creation stories in the book of Genesis, and they both cannot be taken literally.

Intelligent Design (ID) is a more flexible theory for Christians. ID states that evolution is a way for God to create. However, it downplays the role of human free will by not allowing for a circumstantial plan based on humans' decisions and actions. Also, it minimizes the genuine newness of God's creation by stating that God already has the plan for his creation laid out. Proponents of ID say that God is omniscient, knowing everything that will happen in the future, but this actually limits Him. Why can't God have new ideas?

Natural Theology and Theistic Evolution both hold that evolution is a tool for God to use in creating new things. Differing from ID, neither of these two theories states that God already has a set plan in place for the future. They allow for the results of free will, saying that God is able to adapt his plan and work with our actions. However, some Christians say that these theories interpret the Bible's account of creation too loosely.

Naturalism leaves no room for God in creation. While completely accepting all scientific evidence of evolution, naturalists ignore any evidence of religion or God playing a role in creation. Obviously, the naturalism theory does not coexist with religion, and one could not claim to be both a Christian and a naturalist.

Reading scientific articles and evaluating them from the Christian and the secular perspectives has helped me to develop a stronger and more sound faith. In addition, learning more about chemistry, biology, and ecology has made me realize how amazing God's creation truly is. As Paul Sponheim, a professor at Luther Seminary, said, "I see no reason why God can't use evolution to create a new thing." Science and religion do not have to be in conflict. Together they can provide Christians and non-Christians with a more complete and well-informed theory of creation.

## Sources

- Dembski, William A. *Intelligent Design*. Illinois: Intravarsity, 1999. p106.
- Hall, Donovan. "The Scope of Natural Theology." *The St. Alban's Lectures*. (1996.) 2 August 2007.
- Justin. "Analyzing Jesus: Scientific Evidence for being Jewish Messiah." *Politics and Religion*. (2007.) 6 August 2007. [politicsandreligion.wordpress.com/2007/08/03/analyzing-jesus-scientific-evidence-for-being-jewish-messiah/](http://politicsandreligion.wordpress.com/2007/08/03/analyzing-jesus-scientific-evidence-for-being-jewish-messiah/)
- "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents." (2007.) 6 August 2007. [www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html).
- Minkel, J. R. "Offering to a Stone Snake Provides the Earliest Evidence of Religion." *Scientific American*. (2006.) 2 August 2007.
- Newly Revised Standard Version Bible*. Genesis Chapter 1.
- Powell, Don Editor. "Human Genome Project Shows the Wonder and the Mystery of Humankind." *Sanger Institute*. (2003.) 2 August 2007
- Sponheim, Paul. Group Interview. 28 June 2007.

# THE IMAGE OF GOD THROUGH POETRY

*Brittney Sickman, New Prague, MN*

## A Prayer

Give me hope  
Give me strength  
Give me peace  
Calm my mind  
Let it rest  
Stop thinking  
In poetry form  
Ok maybe not  
Give me love  
Give me family  
Give me friends  
Give me courage  
Give me trust  
Now don't let my mind rust  
Let me be happy  
Let me be rich  
Let me be healthy  
Let them care  
Let them think  
Let them be nice  
Let them be  
Let me be  
Let us all be  
Who we are  
Not for them  
But for us and only us  
So we can say let me or give me  
But don't really change us  
To be something we aren't  
Let us be us and ONLY us

While at the Summer Theology Institute we didn't really talk about prayer. Very often, we did talk about how we see God everywhere and we don't always have to pray for God to listen to us. I knew this already because God is always watching us. This poem shows how we can want things and God listens to us, but most of all it shows that people often pray for things they don't need. People pray for different things they want to have; things they think they need. You can ask for things that you want or need help with. God has the plan set for you. God won't give you every single thing you ask for but will still help you with what he thinks is right. God will do things for you but he won't change who you are.

## **SATAN**

Satan is calling me  
To do something I would regret  
The urge to do something against God's will  
Satan comes in every form  
Whatever will tempt you  
I leave the room and go to the bathroom  
I know I could follow Satan  
But I try not to  
I can't overcome him alone  
So I turn to God and say a prayer  
To help me beat Satan  
God clears my head and tells me to go back to class  
He tells me he will be with me  
And help me overcome Satan  
The last thing he said to me was...  
"All you have to do is believe; do you?"  
Satan might know you  
But God knows you better  
You just need to side with one  
My choice is God!  
Are you going to fall to Satan,  
Or let God help you along your way?

Sin means missing the mark, falling short of God's plan. It is not only doing wrong and failing to do what God wants (lying, gossiping, losing your temper, lustful, thoughts, ect.) but it is also an attitude of ignoring or rejecting God which is a result of our sinful nature. In 2004, fifty percent of people who claim that they are Christians say Satan doesn't exist. Some people think you can believe in one and not the other. If you don't believe in Satan, sin is much easier to commit. People turn from God because the pleasure of sin and serving Satan is so much easier. We are not looking for the easy way out; we are looking to serve God and complete His will. God can't help you unless you ask for His help. 1 John 3:8 says, "Whoever continues to sin belongs to the devil, because the devil has sinned from the very beginning. The son of God appeared for this very reason, to destroy what the devil has done."

## **People**

We all came with different things  
Different expectations  
Scared, excited, not knowing how to feel  
But we talked  
We listened and learned  
We have now said this is great  
Our faith is stronger  
Or at least wiser  
We find we connect  
And now it is time for us to say our pre-goodbyes  
We think of the times we had  
We don't know if we will see each other again  
But we want to make sure  
We stay connected to each other  
And our faith...  
Keep learning and growing  
Time to leave is coming soon  
But we will never forget this  
God won't let us!

God makes plans for all of us. God wants to see us grow in our faith and work in His magical ways. Some people don't like to meet new people but we have to. God has made it this way. We are put into each other's life for a reason. That reason is to help one another. It doesn't matter how old you are or how young you are; God loves us and wants us to live the best life we can. Some times we are together for only a little while and other times we are together for longer. It all just depends. God wants us to learn, and we learn from others by helping them. God loves us. He will answer our prayers, help us beat Satan, keep us as who we are, and He will help us with meeting new people.

# GOD AND GENDER

*Hannah Johnson, Mendota Heights, MN*

Christianity is always described as having a father figure: God, complete with a friendly white beard and loud, booming voice. Throughout the English translations of the Bible, God is referred to our father. Yet when my eyes close, I don't see the beard or pleasantly aged face that seems to be popular, but a distinctly feminine figure complete with flowing robes and a soprano voice.

This difference in vision goes deeper than just the picture that pops into my head when the name God is spoken. Throughout history, women were viewed as the weaker sex. Thomas Aquinas, Catholic theologian of the Middle Ages, even believed that women were incomplete human beings. The anti-feminine sentiment that carried through many of his teachings has affected many people's opinions today.

Even in contemporary culture, women are often looked at as bearers of the original sin, and so a lesser moral being than men. It is partially because of this that God is associated with the father rather than the mother. If women have a moral piece missing, who would want to envision a morally flawed God? The idea that women are more corrupted in flesh than men is one that has been around since the beginnings of time and is not a new idea with Christianity. In fact, Christianity has continued to strengthen this obscure idea.

God, however, is the creator. Even in Christianity women are valued for their gift of giving life, the miracle of birth. Although men play a part, women are the ones who create the life inside themselves. The ability to create in an intimate way is one that women share with God, our creator and mother.

The image of God as a woman is one that is not new, but in fact very old. The Celts worshiped a mother goddess with a consort god. It was the mother who was viewed as creator and most high. The idea of giving God any gender was more of an English translation than an actual idea from the original text. Because the Bible was translated to English and not actually written originally in English, much of the exact meaning has been lost, as is always the case with translations. The Hebrew language has a pronoun that is gender neutral, whereas the English language does not. Therefore any translations into English would have to pick a gender and stick with it. In the patriarchal society of Europe, the male gender was chosen as the closer representation of God.

The point of this essay was not to prove that God's gender was that of a woman, or that women are closer to God than men, but to help open people's minds to the different images of God, that no single image is correct, and no single image incorrect. The idea that God is masculine is an outdated belief. God really is above any human concept, and not limited to just one.

## Sources

About.com: Women's History, [http://womenshistory.about.com/od/aquinasonwomen/Aquinas\\_on\\_Women.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/aquinasonwomen/Aquinas_on_Women.htm)  
Masey, Leslie. *Women in the Church*.  
Translating the Bible. <http://www.mb-soft.com/believe/txh/version7.htm>  
Wijngaards, John. *National Catholic Reporter*. January 14, 2000, p. 20.

# BE A SERVANT: LET HIS LOVE SHINE

*Jill Kobilka, Bemidji, MN*

I have grown glasses this year. Well, how about a special suit? No, I have a new genetic mutation. Okay, so maybe that's just what it feels like; but this year, I have spent a considerable amount of time searching for God. The Summer Theology Institute made me look for *Imago Dei*: The Image of God. A mission trip allowed me to search for signs of God in places that I'm not used to. Places that made me feel uncomfortable. A backpacking trip made me reach out for God and feel Him in His wondrous creation. But I think what has brought me the closest to God and where I have seen Him most was in the time I have spent being a missionary, a servant. I mean more than spreading the Good News to people who haven't heard it, or doing the stereotypical mission trip work like painting and building houses. I was a missionary when I played and read with children in Bayou La Batre, Alabama, and Ponemah, Minnesota. I was a missionary because I spent hours at a time talking and praying with people about God and His plan for them and others, and for the world.

Being a missionary has been important because it has brought my relationships to a newer, deeper level. It has brought me closer to God because I speak to Him more in prayer, and I am more aware of His presence and His miracles. It has brought the people with whom I react closer to God because I allow Him to speak to them through me. And in the same way I know that others have brought me closer to God. Being a missionary has also made my relationships with others stronger in God because we have had these faith experiences together and through God because he has shown me amazing people whom I would never have met had I not listened to Him calling me to these places.

One of the most important things I have learned about being a missionary is that to be a missionary is to be a servant. I mean this in the way that Richard Foster described it when he said, "When we choose to be a servant, we surrender the right to decide whom and when we will serve. We will become available and vulnerable" (Foster). It is very comforting and assuring knowing that God will steer me in the direction of someone in need. At the same time, however, I can't help but feel slightly nervous because I know he will challenge me and push me out of my comfort zone, which is often a scary thing.

As I was doing some researching for this paper, I came across a quote that, to a certain extent, alarmed me. The quote is from Bono during an interview with Peter Mansbridge on CBC television:

I mean what is going on with the churches? It is incredible; I tell these evangelicals in the United States there are 2,300 verses of scripture about the poor. It's the central message outside of personal redemption, the idea of dealing with the poor. And I am asking them where are they? Where are they on this?

It seems to Bono, and quite possibly to a whole host of others, that not everyone is doing their part to help those in need. And by saying "those in need" I mean much more than the impoverished. There are multitudes of people who need help. There are people who need a helping hand to overcome their addictions, or to flee from abuse. There are children who need a positive mentor and there are peers who need to talk about God. As Mother Teresa once said, "We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked, and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for is the greatest poverty" (en.thinkexist.com). What can we do about this? How do we fix this image that Bono has described?

To begin, we can look to Jesus as an example. After washing his disciples' feet Jesus said, "I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you" (John 13:15, NLT). Jesus washing his disciples' feet was a role-switching of sorts. Only slaves and servants washed feet, and here was Jesus

washing the feet of those who called him “Lord.” We should follow this example in every possible way we can think. It is our duty to go out and be servants of the people of the world, and to do it in Jesus’ name with God’s love. For Jesus said “Your love for one another will prove to the world you are my disciples” (John 13:35, NLT).

So how do we show our love? We can tell people that we love them, which may be comforting, but it doesn’t solve many people’s problems. John tells us, “Let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions” (1 John 3:18). If we can show our love by our actions we can fight the poverty described by Mother Teresa. We can show our love along with others by changing the image that Bono has depicted of the church. We can show our love through charity, because according to C.S. Lewis, “Charity means ‘Love, in the Christian sense’” (Lewis).

If we learn how to show our love for others by doing, we will learn another way to perceive God. We have heard many times throughout our lives that “God is love.” In some cases the two are even interchangeable. I believe that they are in the following words from Saint Augustine:

What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has the eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like ([en.thinkexist.com](http://en.thinkexist.com)).

Earlier, I said that I have been looking for *Imago Dei*. Well, I found it here. I inserted “God” instead of “love” and I discovered a true image of God. I remembered how God can feel people’s pain, and he can liberate them. But I realized that he wants us to help him by serving others. If we ask Him to give us these tools that Augustine has spoken of, we can improve our ability to know and do God’s will. We can be another step closer to showing our love. If we ask God to let his image shine through us, it will be a glorious thing. For Acts 1:8 states: “When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and tell people about me everywhere ... to the ends of the earth” (NLT).

## Sources

Augustine. [http://en.thinkexist.com/quotation/what\\_does\\_love\\_look\\_like-it\\_has\\_the\\_hands\\_to\\_help/304346.html](http://en.thinkexist.com/quotation/what_does_love_look_like-it_has_the_hands_to_help/304346.html)

Bono. Interview with Peter Mansbridge. October 17, 2006. CBC Television.

Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline*. 25th Anniversary edition. HarperOne, 1998

*Holy Bible*: New Living Translation ©1996

Lewis, C.S.. *Mere Christianity*. HarperCollins Edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

Mother Theresa. [http://en.thinkexist.com/quotation/we\\_think\\_sometimes\\_that\\_poverty\\_is\\_only\\_being/216176.html](http://en.thinkexist.com/quotation/we_think_sometimes_that_poverty_is_only_being/216176.html)

# ECONOMICS OF OUR FAITH

*Hilary Vokovan, Coon Rapids, MN*

The theme this year for the Summer Theology Institute held at Augsburg College during July was *Imago Dei*, or “The Image of God.” The one place I would like to share about where I see God is in our American culture. For example, our class took notice to where we see God in popular television shows such as *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*. We noticed God’s relationship is seen almost as a vending machine where we can put money into and pick what we want out. There are many social concerns dealing with where we see God, but I believe that a larger problem is the economic concern in our American culture. We cannot just give some money to the church and get the OK from God to live on doing whatever we please. We are called as Christians to help others not only in our weekly givings, but also in our daily aid to the poor by doing kind, simple acts that may not seem like a lot, but will actually make a bigger difference than any amount of money ever could.

In 2007, Charles Fishman stated in his article, “Message in a Bottle,” that Americans spent over \$15 billion on bottled water including Poland Spring, Fiji, Evian, and Aquafina. Also in 2006, The Specialty Coffee Association of America stated that Americans spent over \$12 billion on coffee ranging from \$3-5 per time of purchase daily. Many of us are caught in the trap of buying these small luxuries because they seem like a small price to pay. In my recent trip to the grocery store I noticed that bottled water only cost \$1.25. And going to Starbucks I can get a caramel light whip Macchiato for only \$3.75. That seems cheap to get a bottle of Aquafina and Starbucks for under \$5.00. But it seems too often than not, Christians are cheap in our givings. Not only in giving money to the poor (as opposed to giving directly to the church) but also with our time and energy. We may say we give a lot to the church, but how much of that money is actually going to help the poor or the community? Too often than not, a large percent from some church funding goes to help renovate the sanctuary or help remodel a new kitchen. Don’t get me wrong, cleaning up a church is not out of line, but where we cross the line is in our greed for unnecessary restorations. Also when people write checks or drop off stuff to the church, the church almost seems like a distribution center where the rich can drop off stuff while the poor come to pick it up. Both go away feeling good, but no one leaves transformed.

We not only need to help with our money, but also with our time. Americans spend an average of five to six hours per day watching television and an average of four hours on the Internet. That could be over 10 hours of your day just spent on technology. Desiree Sayle, talking in a press release from USA Freedom Corp in “Ask the White House,” states that “many organizations need man hours as much as financial resources. On average, one hour of volunteer time is worth the equivalent of \$20 to the organization.” If we could save the \$3.75 from our daily coffee routine and only watched one television program instead of hours of it and instead used that money to make a meal for a family who cannot afford to make one, and spent one hour talking to a person in a homeless or abuse shelter, just think what that could do to help futures of poor brothers and sisters in our communities.

Consider Matthew 25:31:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed

me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or mine, you did for me.’ Then he will say to those on the left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

We as Christians are called from God to not only give money to the poor, but we are also called to give our time, our clothes, our food, and our love to the poor. Let’s take another look at Matthew 25 and see a new interpretation from Shane Claiborne, author of *Irresistible Revolution*.

I’m just not convinced that Jesus is going to say, ‘When I was hungry, you gave a check to the United Way and they fed me.’ Or, ‘When I was naked, you donated clothes to the Salvation Army and they clothed me.’ Jesus is not seeking distant acts of charity. He seeks concrete acts of love: ‘you fed me...you visited me in prison...you welcomed me into your home...you clothed me.’

I feel that in today’s society, many Christians feel that helping the poor and needy is to write out a check or give spare change to programs. That is a good thing to do, but that shouldn’t be the only thing we do. Shane Claiborne also writes about his experience as a child listening to John Wesley, “If I should die with more than 10 pounds, may every man call me a liar and a thief.” Then Shane Claiborne watched as the Methodist church he attended built a \$120,000 stained glass window for the sanctuary. He writes, “I stared at that window, I longed for Jesus to break out of it, to free himself, to come to rise from the dead ... again.”

We cannot be wrapped up in our image of God as a place to drop off money or items. We need to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give water to the thirsty, and give shelter to the homeless. We are called as Christians to help by doing simple kind acts that no amount of money could ever surpass. I will close with a story called “Potato Chips,” written anonymously. As you read this, think about how you can affect people with your simple acts of kindness. You never know, you may just be seeing God.

“A little boy wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed a suitcase with a bag of potato chips and a six-pack of root beer and started his journey. When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park, just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry, so he offered her some chips. She gratefully accepted and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Again, she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said one word. As twilight approached, the boy realized how tired he was and got up to leave; but before he had gone more than one step, he turned around, ran back to the old woman, and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever. When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, ‘What did you do today that made you so happy?’ He replied, ‘I had lunch with God.’ But before his

mother could respond, he added, ‘You know what? She’s got the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen.’ Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and he asked, ‘Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?’ She replied, ‘I ate potato chips in the park with God.’ However, before the son responded, she added, ‘You know, he’s much younger than I expected.’ Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. People come into our lives for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. Embrace all equally.”

Have lunch with God ... bring chips.

### **Sources**

Burton, Cheryl. “Coffee Crazyed.” ABC7Chicago.com. August 6, 2007.

Claiborne, Shane. *The Irresistible Revolution*. The Simple Way: Zondervan, 2006.

Fishman, Charles. “Message in a Bottle.” July 2007. Issue 117. Page 110.

*Holy Bible*. New International Version: Zondervan, 1984.

Sayle, Desiree. “USA Freedom Corp Press Release.” Ask The White House. April 21, 2004.

# SUFFERING WITH GOD

*Kayla Nordahl, Anoka, MN*

Everyone goes through times of suffering, whether it's a time of grief, heartache, or starvation; everyone deals with it at one point or another. As someone is going through this time, he/she wonders, "What is the point of this?" and "If God is 'always there' then where is God now?" During one of our class periods at the Summer Theology Institute we took a look at suffering. Our discussions made me want to take a deeper look at how God is experienced through personal suffering and how God shines through even the darkest moments.

I believe that God does not cause suffering, but that God lives with the consequences of suffering. My theory is that the devil waves temptation into someone's hands. That person gets to choose his/her path of fate. This theory is shown by Hebrews 5:15-16 which reads: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with our confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." This passage states that we will be tempted by the devil or something of an evil nature, but it is our decision to choose that path. It also shows that God will have mercy and help through the suffering that follows.

I also believe that God suffers with the oppressed. I believe He is right beside the newly deemed widow weeping, and walking alongside the homeless man begging for food. Matthew 25:38-40 reads: "... Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply 'I tell you the truth, whatever you do for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' " I think that this passage is saying that God is there with those people as they are suffering and other people help him heal the ones that are suffering. I also think that God is very present among those who are suffering.

Along with the other beliefs about suffering I also believe that suffering never truly goes away and that God builds things out of suffering, things like hope, perseverance, and courage. I think that suffering can be forgotten for a long period of time, but when the thought of it is brought up again, it brings back that suffering and the memories and experiences that go with it.

On December 5, 2001 a fatal accident occurred down the street from a bar. A drunk man driving a van hit a little car with a woman driver not wearing a seatbelt. Applying my theory, I believe this man was tempted to drink and drive. I also believe this woman was tempted not to wear her seatbelt. I also believe fate came upon them when they collided on the road. The woman died instantly, the man and his passengers all hardly had a scratch. I think that this is when God began his work showing his mercy and unfailing love through suffering. I believe he showed it in this stage of suffering by embracing all of the family and friends of the woman who died.

A particular family member of the woman who died was in fifth grade when the accident occurred, but for some reason was never affected by this tragic incident until about the middle of his freshman year in high school. At this time he really began to ache for her presence. On Mother's Day of that year, the most precious gift of all was given to him, the woman's guitar. This was a piece of the woman and now a piece of him. That gift showed God's grace and how through suffering everything pointed back only to him. There was a Bob Dylan song written in her handwriting tucked inside the guitar case. The song is called "Forever Young." God shone through yet again at the ELCA National Youth Gathering later that summer. While this youth was at the gathering, he wished for an angel at the exact moment the Bob Dylan impersonator walked on stage. God showed His bright face during this low point of grief. He suffered alongside those in sadness and grief, and his timing was perfect: He knew the exact moment to send a messenger onto the stage, even when the youth did not know what he needed at that moment.

Now as this family member keeps living, every day some type of thought of the woman pops into his head and memories flow back. He begins to miss her more and more with every passing day. Life goes on but the suffering remains. Through all of this it has made him realize how much and in what ways God touches people. It has also made him more confident to be on stage, and more willing to be unafraid of messing up.

On a bright September day, early in the morning, as a nation began to wake, a national disaster occurred. A tower representing the free trade of the most powerful nation in the world was destroyed by an act of terrorism. The terrorists were tempted to cause this destruction and did not fight this temptation. They caused suffering to families and friends to those of the fallen, but also to their own people. Now, because of this operation, a group that was at one point supported by this powerful nation is at war with it. As God promised He will be there until the end of the age, and He is. So during this time He held the men, women, and children on both sides. He shared in their losses and grief and in their dreams and aspirations for the future.

This newly-stunned nation stared at TV screens for hours and hours on end as they were pressing for more and more details. They watched death tolls rise along with more word on where the terrorists originated from. Yet God was still suffering right beside every victim of the event. He did this by comforting them when they found the news. Whether they accepted it or not was up to them, but nonetheless He was there for them to lean on and blame, even though it wasn't his fault. He was right beside them during every heated, hot-blooded conversation, and every soothing tear they cried.

As this nation heals, it is constantly being reminded of September 11, 2001. The people of this powerful nation are fighting a war on terrorism which is the result of the attack. Through this event the United States has become stronger because it knows it needs to be on a constant look for threats. It has also given more perseverance to this nation because it will not surrender, so it keeps bringing out the best and the brightest to the battlefield. Another thing it has brought is more security because this country is now prepared for a disaster with a little preparation.

So God made something good come from evil. God doesn't cause suffering; he deals with it. God suffers with us, even though it never goes away. God makes good things come from suffering, giving us faith.

# RIDING TANDEM

*Erin Stene, Eden Prairie, MN*

*Imago Dei*, the image of God, is a very intellectual concept for a rising senior in high school to fully embrace and comprehend. Nonetheless, I was privileged and honored to be recommended and to attend the Summer Theology Institute at Augsburg College. To say that it was a life-changing and faith-enriching event is to understate the nature of change that occurred in my life. Prior to my experience at the Summer Theology Institute, I knew I loved God. In fact, I got along with Him pretty well, but the Summer Theology Institute provided me with the opportunity to deepen my faith journey—and explore the questions of substance involved when one has faith. Through the activities, discussions, readings, and worship experiences, I came to a fuller and deeper appreciation of God—as God—as well as a more profound comprehension of the nature of God, His character, and how He works in our lives. It is my belief that God desires to have a personal relationship with us, His creation. It has been a blessing for me to explore what God means to me personally. I have also been impressed by the ways that God has revealed Himself to me through various revelations at the institute.

On the last night of camp, the group rode a variety of bicycles around Lake Calhoun. We had recumbent and tandem bicycles as well as the regular bicycles. I had never ridden a tandem bike before, so I was completely thrilled when presented with the chance to do so. Marrta and I giggled nervously as we watched pairs literally crash and burn; apparently, getting the hang of a two-person bike was harder than it seemed. As we continued to watch people return in two's with their bikes, looking to trade in their failed tandems for something simpler, Marrta and I, though still somewhat apprehensive, walked our bike to the lake.

Choosing to live a life with God is like riding a tandem bike with the Lord. God is there for you—to support and guide you, but when we are in rhythm with God's lead, all things are possible. When biking, ostensibly Marrta and I rode in silence, yet mute as we were, we silently engaged in conversation. Sometimes one knows, without words, what another is thinking; sometimes it is wonderful to sit alone with one's thoughts, and sometimes the spoken word is like access to the soul and mind of another. That is the exquisite thing about a relationship with God; it is both an opportunity for self-reflection, yet it is, simultaneously, an “other-oriented” relationship.

Part of the reason that Marrta and I succeeded in our bike journey was because, despite our independence, we did not fight each other in the process. One must surrender and submit to the relationship—and the unknown journey—while also keeping the faith in the other's abilities to continue the ride. Marrta and I were in synch with each other. We trusted each other's instincts and actions as we glided effortlessly around the lake. There was a great sense of peace in this exercise. Though Marrta and I are each unique and independent beings, we acted and responded as one. Similarly, a fulfilling walk with Christ involves surrender. It involves trust. To embark upon a journey of faith with the Almighty necessitates a submissive heart. I need, and want, to surrender my will to His will, and have faith that He has my best interests in heart. As Jeremiah 29:11 confirms: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (NRSV). How awesome is our God who promises us a life filled with Hope!

As an affirmation of faith, I am deeply touched by God's grace and unconditional love. When I review my short life, I see how fiercely self-reliant I thought I was: I resisted God. I could not explain evil or why bad things happened to good people. Despite my lack of belief, there was still an irresistible draw to know and love God. It is a scary and uncertain thing to trust in someone unseen. God is invisible, but omnipresent? This is a complex concept. Pastor and theologian Paul Spohnheim raises this point in his writing: “The God who is present with each is the God who is present with all” (p. 31). How does this happen? I cannot explain it, but I know God's constant presence is Truth. God

understands our plight. His Word addresses faith on so many levels, but one of my favorite verses about faith is found in the book of Hebrews: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1, NIV) I am now certain of what I cannot see, and I am eager to pursue my journey of faith. I know and believe that God is always with me. His Word assures me; I am reminded of the song I learned as a small child, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

When the Summer Theology Institute met with Paul Sponheim, the featured speaker and author of the week’s studied materials, he left us with an encouraging quote: “Summoned or not, I will be present.” As a girl who was somewhat lost to organized religion, I not only found his words reassuring, but inspiring. I love the notion that God is, and always has been, with me despite ... myself. I recall that childish belligerence of my youth that said “I don’t have to believe in you, God!” No matter how far I stepped away or protested His presence, God was with me anyway. It is comforting to come to this point in my life and know that God does exist and that He does love me. I am moved by the verse in Romans that affirms that nothing can separate us from the love of God:

If God is for us who can be against us?...For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God, that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:31, 38-39 NIV)

What a gift and a promise God has bestowed upon us through Christ; nothing can ever separate me from the love of God. When all is said and done, this promise of God’s love remains. I am never alone.

God is a mystery. There are things I will not know and understand until I meet Him in Heaven: “For now I see through a glass dimly, but then I shall see face to face...” (I Corinthians 13:12, RSV) I have come to accept that faith does not mean I have to have all of the answers right now. In point of fact, I cannot possibly know all about God because He is infinite and I am finite. When I meet my Maker face to face, it is my hope that not only will I see His face clearly, but that He may say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21 NIV).

### Sources

Sponheim, Paul. *Speaking of God, Relational Theology*. Danvers, MA: Clearance Center. 2006.

# IMAGO DEI DIALOGUE

*Emily Kimball, Eagan, MN*

Expressing the beliefs I have about God used to be very difficult for me. I thought I had all the right answers and that opposite viewpoints were simply wrong. I now know that I do not know everything about God, and this has made my faith stronger. I now see these discussions as a great opportunity to throw out ideas, to do some questioning, as well as to come to conclusions in order to hopefully clarify my image of God. It is good to talk about faith with others because it strengthens our understanding of ourselves, our bonds with each other as people of faith, as well as our view of God as something more than we will ever understand.

I used to not like to talk about my faith with other people. I thought of it as painful and frustrating to argue with people who disagreed with things I believe in, but now I see it as a chance to think about why I believe certain things about God. We need to assess why we have faith and believe as we do.

When our initial understandings seem no longer tenable, when we must decide among several conflicting understandings of faith, deliberative theologies develop as the result of self-consciously weighing alternative theological views” (Stone 35).

The image of God in individuals’ minds will stay the same if one chooses not to understand other points of view. While this is not necessarily harmful, it would leave a person rather narrow-minded, and he or she may miss out on what could be valuable experiences.

At the Summer Theology Institute this summer, I talked about my faith with other people more than I ever have before. We all believed that God is almighty being and that He loves us, but from there we had several disagreements. Questions such as Is a belief in Jesus necessary in order to get into heaven?, Is evolution against religion or is it a tool of God in creation?, Would it be good or bad to incorporate religion into politics?, and many others were all excellent questions that had my head spinning. I still do not have answers for many of the things we contemplated, but my faith strengthened because of them. My eyes opened to ideas I never thought of before. Some of the views I disagreed with, but in order for me to come to the conclusion that they were incorrect, I had to come up with a firm argument for why I opposed certain viewpoints. Other ideas made complete sense right away and have been added to my long list of things I believe about God.

As people of faith, discussing God and our different images of him in a peaceful and open-minded way binds us together as a community. Whether we are discussing our faiths as Christians or as people of different religions, we are able to join together as a group that recognizes God as a powerful and loving being that cares about us. Yes, we grow individually with our God-talk, but we grow as a people, too. The more we try to describe God, the more our agreements and disagreements tie us all together as beings who will never know the whole story or the complete answer. When I was at the Summer Theology Institute, we all grew together as people of faith. We came to agree on things and disagree on others, but we were all confused enough to understand that God is more than we can comprehend. And yet, He binds us together as believers who want to know Him and grow in Him.

All of us at the Summer Theology Institute discovered that theology is a study of religion and of God, interconnected. “... God, who is ‘not far from us’ directs us to each other in dialogue and even in dispute. We are in a sense challenged to seek the truth and to make meaning together” (Sponheim 153). Discovering God can only happen if we talk about Him with others. I go to church every Sunday and listen to the pastors preach God’s Word. I taught Sunday school and facilitated discussion with ninth-grade confirmation students. How did I find out about God in the first place? From my parents: they told me about Him. “Whether or not church people understand the meaning of Christian faith

adequately and communicate it effectively makes a real world difference” (Stone 15). The story of God has been passed down through the ages through word of mouth and recorded in the Bible. And the story continues on today and tomorrow and forever. All believers in God all over the world continue spreading His word, even if we tend to disagree.

No matter how much we talk about God, no matter how many conclusions we come to, and even the number of agreements we have as a people, this will not change how little we will ever understand God in this lifetime. We each have our images of Him, but they are just that: images. God is far greater than any image that we come up with. Some of our images may be fairly close, while others seem to be very far off. And yet we will never fully know which image is right, and the countless many that inaccurately portray God. If everyone’s idea on the image of God is unique, however, this is actually a good thing. Just try to imagine what the world would be like if every single person had the exact same image of God. While this might sound ideal from the standpoint that there would no longer be any religious wars, it would be better to think of this a little deeper. If we all agreed on every little detail about God, we would believe that we completely understood God. That is a scary thought! Would it really be a comfort to rely on God during life’s challenges if we completely understood Him? Not really. Our image of God would lose its sacredness, its majesty, and its larger-than-life safety. This mystery surrounding God is a key concept in God’s image. We need to be able to fathom that we cannot fathom God. Our confusion when attempting to explain something as complex as God simply shows us that we are human. “There will be no perfect, complete theology. But in our speaking of God, we can do better, rather than worse. In this it will be essential to recognize the reality of ineradicable ambiguity” (Sponheim 153). We may make mistakes in interpreting what He wants us to do, but that is what forgiveness is for. God knows His creation has flaws, but his love for us is made even deeper through this knowledge.

Our understanding of ourselves, our bonds with other people, and our understanding of God as greater than we can comprehend is all improved upon by talking about God, especially with other people. After my experience at STI, I feel far more open in talking about my faith, especially with those who have different views than I. I am firm in many beliefs about God, but I think I am much more open to new ideas now than I was before. Instead of feeling threatened and getting defensive against viewpoints that contradict my own, I see it as an opportunity that is well worth my time. The image of God is something that we can only know in a mirror dimly now, but will someday see face to face.

### Sources

Sponheim, Paul R. *Speaking of God*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006.

Stone, Howard W., and James O. Duke. *How to Think Theologically*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

---

AUGSBURG  
COLLEGE

2211 Riverside Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55454  
612-330-1000 • [www.augsburg.edu](http://www.augsburg.edu)