

## Catching Water in a Net: Imagining the Divine

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My reflections today come from a book in progress, with a working title, “Catching Water in a Net: Imagining the Divine,” which indicates my roller-coaster experience with this subject. One morning, I rush to the computer with an idea and then wander the house all day arguing with myself, “What can *anyone* know about God? Isn’t that exactly what I *hate* – people who claim to know who or what God is?” What keeps me going also keeps Japanese artists painting. Despite the satisfaction of reproducing in mirror detail a bowl of fruit, Japanese artists prefer the hints and intimations of what is *not* there – a bud not yet open; a mountain just a few brush strokes away. Just as Japanese artists work with hints, suggestions, sounds and smells, I am writing about God with equal lightness and non-possessiveness, not claiming to make it add up; describe it for all time or ensure all the lines are straight.

A missionary once asked a Pacific island chief, “Have you, my dear sir, no conception of a deity?” The chief replied, “We know that at night-time someone goes by amongst the trees, but we never speak of it.” From earliest times, people have asked the same questions -- Who are we? Where did we begin? What are our limits? Does something pull our puppet strings?” and “Can we manipulate them for our benefit? The ancients certainly sensed Something bigger than themselves, even if tenuously. An ancient Indian Vedic text says:

*... Who knows the truth? Who can tell whence and how arose this universe? ... Only that God who sees in highest heaven ... He only knows, or perhaps he knows not<sup>i</sup>*

There is a difference between knowing *that* Something exists (or doesn’t) and knowing *what* it might be (or not be). The former comes through experiences of awe, contact or fear which, on reflection, seem orchestrated from beyond. The latter is *second-hand* knowing – human descriptions of the Something which then become the beliefs of the clan. Around the world, this Something has been described differently -- as an amorphous force, like South Pacific *Mana* or Hindu *Brahman*; as extra-human forms like *jinns*, *angels* and *mimi spirits*; and as human beings writ large – the Gods. This is a language exercise -- the words and images used to describe the Something in sacred texts and doctrines actually *create* the varying versions of that Something.

This Something had to be *located*. Ancients usually envisioned two realms sharing the same physical space and breathing the same air; a human realm of limits, powerlessness and uncertainty, and a divine realm free of all such limits. Hindu Vedic Beings lived, loved and battled in known earthly regions; the Sacred Beings of Aboriginal Australia created the landscape and remained present in their creations; and the Hebrew beginning story put Gods and humans in the same Garden, later becoming neighbors when God’s garden became a *gated* community. Despite our version of this story as separation, *God* actually came and went in the neighborhood and was present at Eve’s first confinement - “I have produced a man with the help of the Lord,” she said (Genesis 4:1) In Hebrew thought, the term “heaven” had two different meanings – the *physical* dome of the sky; and the spiritual realm where God was, which encompassed everything and everywhere. John’s Gospel differentiates these realms sharing

the same space as “earthly” things the disciples understood and “heavenly” things they did not. Only later, under Greek influence, the two Hebrew meanings were merged into one by a sleight of language and God’s “heavenly” realm was relegated from immanent shared space to transcendent dome of the sky.

At the mysterious border between these realms, “religion” emerged -- from *religio*, “to bind,” binding the ordinary to the extraordinary; the profane to the sacred. Religions answered the human questions. While some people insist that only *their* answer is true, there are *hundreds* of stories explaining how the world came to be; why humans differ from Gods; and how humans relate to Gods. These stories differ with location, knowledge, experience and worldview, but the questions which lit the fires in ancient hearts still burn in our hearts today, despite our technology and science. When a loved one slips away or our child goes missing, fear still rolls over us like a suffocating blanket and our first reflex, like our ancestors, is to cry to Something for help, regardless of whether we acknowledge that Something in more rational moments of life.

What makes human beings believe there is Something more? Think about your own experience as I make a list:

- because we have been taught to believe from birth and are either content with this or afraid to question
- because, in ordinary moments, we experience feelings, power and emotions beyond human capacity to generate.
- Because we “see” the Divine in the world around us and scientific explanations cannot disperse that awe and wonder
- because to be human needs an opposite -- something that defines what we are *not*
- because a God is *useful*, like the genie of the lamp -- we want Something to get us out of trouble; help us *through* death and guarantee something beyond it.
- because we feel the urge for Something as part of being human and we take a chance on the probability scale.

Many, of course, do not believe in Something more, or have not found satisfactory answers, no matter how hard they search. Unfortunately, many people have been exposed to only one idea of God, usually from family, and they spend the rest of their lives cultivating, ignoring, adapting or rejecting this. Many pre-scientific world view Gods no longer cut it in our scientific age. One hundred and fifty years ago, Florence Nightingale pointed out that God-descriptions *evolved* with civilizations and those stuck in outdated world views were simply idols fashioned by human hands. When asked if she believed in God, she would reply “Which God do you mean?” -- the tribal God to be bribed with favors? The God who kept people loyal through fear; or the God that breaks universal laws by intervening to punish some and not others -- which God?

How we imagine the Divine matters! We cannot say we believe in God, or don’t believe, without having some mind image about which we speak. Our God-image determines how we *respond* to It and also how we define ourselves in light of It. If God is a wrathful judge, sizing us up to punish or reward, we live cowering before such scrutiny, constantly fearful we might be found wanting. If God is a powerful ruler, we, as subjects, obey that ruler’s laws, whether just or arbitrary. If God is our lover, we feel loved in the reciprocal relationship of lovers. If God is the universal Life force within us and the world, we are interconnected co-creators with the internal, urging God. Our God-images are about anthropology as much as theology -- we live differently, depending on how we image God.

The most important thing to take away today is that anything we say about God is a *metaphor*, a construction of language and images. We have not seen God so we describe the Divine in metaphorical terms. A metaphor is a word picture used, for the sake of clarity or impact, to describe something else which is difficult to describe. “I froze on the spot!” is a metaphor expressing fear, even though no drop in temperature was involved. If metaphors are useful for human experiences, they are *extremely* useful for describing the *Unknowable*. Metaphors are borrowed from our culture, tradition and worldview, thus are

often *limited* to our culture and experience, making sense only in that setting. Just listen in on a business seminar and count the number of sport and military metaphors used about “taking out” or “immobilizing” the competition! It is not surprising therefore, that the ancients borrowed Divine metaphors from powerful natural elements of wind, fire and water, and later, as humans became more in control of their world, *human* metaphors for God became more prevalent. As the philosopher Xenophanes said, “*Oxen, lions and horses, if they had hands with which to carve images, would fashion gods according to their own shapes and give them bodies like their own.*”<sup>ii</sup> To say God is wise, good and trustworthy actually says more about what *we* value in human beings than what God actually *is*.

Our *problem* today is that we have taken certain culturally limited ancient metaphors cemented in stone and texts as if they were *actual* descriptions of God. Jewish rabbis and early Christian Fathers recognized the allegorical and metaphorical nature of their God descriptions, but many of these became literal descriptions by medieval times -- because they were in the Bible. God became *literally* our King, Judge and Father and us *literally* subjects, sinners and sons. Salvation literally became a human-style conflict between different Beings -- God, the Devil and us. Yet many Biblical metaphors are simply irrelevant today and need to be retired. We continue to teach high-tech urban children about ancient shepherds, as if the *metaphor* is a literal description of God rather than something conjured up to illustrate Divine protection for sheep-herding tribes on the unforgiving Palestinian hills. We sing of God as sword and shield, having never *seen* an Israelite sword, let alone felt the metal - or was it wood - in our hands? Yet people become offended today when we substitute modern-day metaphors! And some Biblical metaphors are downright harmful! What would happen to tenuous global relations today if Israel and its allies invoked the Bible’s warrior God who delighted in destroying Israel’s enemies -- we would be hauled before an international law court? Yet we read Psalms in church still, without comment, that promise God will destroy our enemies and make us prosperous through acquisition of another’s land won by military force!

As many of you already know, the Biblical metaphor “father” is also problematic. The Hebrew word translated as “father” was not limited to a biological father but used for the head of a tribe or town (Gen 19: 37; 1 Chronicles 2: 41-52), advisors to a King (Gen 45:8), or even a profession. In many ways, God as nurturing “mother” better reflects *our* idea of a hands-on, loving parent. Similarly, “Son” of God in the Hebrew Bible was *not* a biological term but used for anyone with an assignment from God - kings (Psalm 2:7); angels (Job 38:7) and all of Israel (Hosea 11:1). By the Fifth Century CE, however, the Christian Church had limited “son of God” to Jesus and reinterpreted the metaphors “son” and “father” as a *literal* and exclusive biological relationship between God and Jesus, courtesy of the virgin birth story which was not even recorded in the earliest Gospel and by arguing that Jesus used the *intimate* term “Abba - father,” even though Jesus also invited his *followers* to use “Abba” and he used *other* terms for God as well. With this Father and Son relationship now cemented in the Trinity, “Father” became the dominant God image, conveniently affirming an all male Church hierarchy because Father and Son are exclusively male metaphors. If you doubt that maleness is somehow important here, even though we say God is without gender, simply call God “*mother*,” a parallel metaphor for parental nurture, and all hell breaks loose. In the same vein, try using Queen for God instead of King!

Despite the plethora of Biblical God-images available, most of us fish from a fairly limited pond. British hymn writer Brian Wren has analyzed the most popular God images in three sources -- a Methodist and Ecumenical Hymnbook; the “Songs of Praise” television program; and the ancient prayers, liturgy and creeds still used in churches.<sup>iii</sup> Of 290 images for God, 73% were the King, Almighty-Father, protector images, where God is a powerful, ruling male. *Because* of this frequency, people in the pews simply *assume* these are the *major* Biblical images for God, yet this is not true! We first meet God in scripture as formless Spirit brooding over the waters; as Life breathed into humanity; as voice, cloud, wind, fortress and shield; as spirit at Jesus’ baptism; comforter after his death; and wind and flame at Pentecost - not a male ruler amongst them. Furthermore, although God’s earthly representative is called ‘Papa,’ (Pope) and his helpers “fathers,” the metaphor “Father” appears only 15 times in the Hebrew Bible and is not the dominant New Testament image. Of 245 New Testament uses, almost half are crowded into John’s gospel, with little emphasis in other gospels - and there is a reason for this unique

preponderance in John. In the same way, our hymns and God-talk continue to praise God as King, even though America, where much of our Christian literature and songs originate, fought a war to do away with kings; and Britain and Australia have had a Queen for sixty years! It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out why the *King James Version*, published to solidify King James' position as head of the church in the 1600's, translated Hebrew leadership metaphors into English as "King" and "Kingdom!" As modern scholars point out, the better translation for kingdom, given Biblical times, would be "household" in the Hebrew Bible or "empire" in the New Testament, given the Jews' experience of Rome at that time. Even our new choruses for contemporary worship services chant King of Kings and Lord of Lords over and over, words no longer in our everyday discourse – the *contemporary* part is that they have removed all *other* words from the song! By moving from many metaphors for Something unknowable, to an almost exclusive male being image means we have made an idol or action figure of God. Unfortunately, our English language has no generic singular other than "it" which denotes something less than or inferior to humans and so, through a *language* convention, God became "He" early on, which, to the average mind today, means male. As a first year student once scolded me, "Of course God is male. He is called he in the Bible!" Yet the Hebrew Bible overflows with images, both human and non-human – eagle, lion, bear, hen, cloud, rock, gardener, builder, potter, wise woman, hiding place, high tower, prophet and law-giver, to name a few. *None* were intended to describe God in *actuality* or exclusively.

How then can we speak of Something that has made a career of obscurity and silence? For ancient Hebrews, Yahweh was always disguised in clouds, thunder or burning bushes. Early Christian scholars, recognizing the unknowable *essence* of the Divine (*ousia*), spoke instead of three *hypostases* or forms -- Source; Word and Spirit. Islam refuses to depict Allah in any human form. So, if God is *not* a Being as we know it, or a Thing as we know it, God is No-one or No-thing (Nothing). What then can we say? According to Maimonides,

*It is therefore better by far to be silent and to be, simply, before God with the intention of your mind, as the Psalm again says: "Ponder upon your beds, and be silent."*<sup>iv</sup>

This is the mystical path – in silence we come to *know* the Something, not a cerebral knowing but an intuitive unknowing that God *is* rather than *what* God is. Silence sends the seeker, not only 'out there,' but inward, to the ground of everything. Mystics not content with silence limit their comments to what God is *not*, called *apophatic* or negative theology -- "God is not impotent," "God is not ignorant," thus avoiding saying what God *is*. Some talk about God as darkness, mysteriously hard to see, like St. Paul's "though a glass darkly." Others talk about Divine absence, meaning that we can never capture God with our camera lens of dogma or butterfly net of Absolute Truth and say "See, there!"

The problem, however, is the slim line between a God who is No-Thing and a God who is Not *anything* -- does not exist. What use is an absent, silent God to whom we pray, feeling we are simply shouting into the wind? We jump to explain God's absence as acceptable, logical and beneficial, but God is *not* there for many people, or remains in obscurity despite prayers tossed, like over-ripe tomatoes, onto God's door-step. At a recent seminar, someone was extolling Luther's "hidden" God idea when a Jewish theologian challenged him, "Don't let God off the hook like that! A hidden God says nothing to the Holocaust survivor. If God was hiding there and did nothing, who wants such a God?" Anthony Flew tells a parable of two explorers who stumbled into a jungle clearing where many flowers and weeds were growing. One said, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagreed, "There is no gardener." They pitch their tents to watch. No gardener is ever seen. "Perhaps he is invisible," said the believer, so they built an electrified fence patrolled with bloodhounds. No cries suggest an intruder; the wire never moves; the bloodhounds never bark. Still the Believer insists, "There *is* a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener without a scent who makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden he loves." His companion then asks the million dollar question, "How does what you call your invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"<sup>v</sup>

“Does God exist” is a question we do not have time to pursue fully today but must be part of any discussion of God. Until the Middle Ages, God’s existence reigned pretty much unchallenged. In the Enlightenment, however, philosophers like Emmanuel Kant outlawed metaphysical speculation and limited God-talk to what humans could know and experience. Consequently, the *cosmological* argument became popular -- that the universe is unintelligible without a First Cause. According to 18<sup>th</sup> century theologian William Paley, if we saw a watch in the forest, we would assume a watchmaker because of its intricate design, thus the glories of nature must also indicate a *Divine* Watchmaker. When emerging scientific knowledge challenged this, “probability” language emerged -- it is more reasonable to suggest there is a God than not. Nature however, does not *uniformly* proclaim a “Designer-above-reproach!” -- with rain comes floods; the magnificent lion slaughters the innocent antelope; cancer strikes the good and the bad. According to Professor H. D. Aiken, “Logically there is no reason why an almighty and omniscient being might not be a perfect stinker.”<sup>vi</sup> John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) also pointed out that nature does *not* “turn one step from her path to avoid trampling us to destruction,” and it would be “unreasonable in us to expect that she should.”<sup>vii</sup> After Darwin, atheism became the term for those that believed God’s existence could not be *proved* or empirically verified and later was applied to *any* denial of a supernatural being or transcendent order. Paul Tillich earned the label in the 1950’s for rejecting an external “Being over against other things” for a “Ground of Being” within. The 1960’s “Death of God” scholars also earned the title and passed the torch to the likes of today’s Bishop Spong for his “non-Theistic God” and Don Cupitt for his “Religious Ideal.” The original *question* “Does God exist?” has also been questioned. Is not existence tied with birth and death, thus not applicable to something infinite or immortal? Many of us today are caught between the failure of old images and an unwillingness to let go of what has given meaning and sense to our lives. As theologian Richard Holloway says -- “*I find that the needle on my own dial trembles midway between non-realism (God is a human invention) and critical realism (there is a mystery out there, but we are inextricably involved in its interpretation) ...I am not quite prepared to reduce the whole of religious experience to human projection.*”<sup>viii</sup>

Of course, there are always those who never question God’s existence because the Bible “tells them so,” but this is a *faith* statement -- faith in what the Bible says about God. This is a circular argument with no external reference points -- God exists because the Bible says so. Why believe the Bible? Because it is God’s word! Where does it say that? In the Bible! Now there is nothing wrong with living by *faith* – we do it all the time when we choose friends, morals and refrigerators – as long as we recognize we are making *faith* choices, not stating empirical proof and forcing others to accept our beliefs – or non-belief -- purely on *our* faith choices. Some Christians also claim that we know God through Jesus, because Jesus is God, but honestly, if you take *all* of Jesus’ sayings about God, we have very slim pickings, especially since modern scholars like the Jesus Seminar have reduced what Jesus probably said even further. Much of what is claimed about the Christian God comes not from the words of Jesus but from Paul’s metaphors and the doctrines and creeds developed by later Church fathers, together with a healthy dose of Greek philosophy!

The *Hebrew* God we actually inherited was formless, manifesting Itself in different ways – like the Buddha said, “*Water is round in a round receptacle and square in a square one, but water itself has no particular shape*”<sup>ix</sup> Unfortunately in Christian art, the Formless One would become exclusively encased in three “fleshly” forms -- an ageing male grey-beard, a youthful male, and a dove perched like a trained falcon on the greybeard’s wrist or flying aimlessly between older and younger male, thus drastically limiting Divine Formlessness in our imagination. Yet Formlessness allows our minds to picture the Divine in so many ways -- Life Force pulsing through us, Energy around us, Be-ing itself, the wild and free Spirit, Matrix of all that is, Enlightenment. Formlessness can also survive an age of science because of its potential to emerge in new forms. The answer “I don’t know” to the question “Who is God?” is not hopeless agnosticism but serious acknowledgement of the question’s limits.

Formlessness describes our first Divine encounter – the Hebrew word *ruah* as wind, breath or Spirit, sweeping the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2 NRSV), coming and going at will, unseen, except for its results. But somehow, Christianity highlighted John 3: 16 in yellow marker pen as its pictorial summary of salvation -- a single male parent God offering up His only son as a blood sacrifice in the

name of love -- “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” Yet earlier in the *same* chapter are two other pictorial metaphors for the Divine involvement in salvation -- “being born from God,” emerging from the Divine womb into new life, (v. 3), an unarguably feminine Divine image; and being born “of the Spirit” imaged as wind.

*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit* (John 3: 8 NRSV).

How we have confined God by our selective reading! What might our theology be if one of these other metaphors had been highlighted in yellow instead by our forebears?

Wind is a powerful metaphor for many religious people dependent on the elements. The four winds symbolized the edges of the universe and controlled the weather. Given its power and unharnessed energy, it is not surprising primal people opted for this Divine image rather than puny human images. *Ruah* also translates as Breath -- life-giving oxygen, breath of the world. Despite theological speculation of what “made in God’s image” might mean, the Genesis story *tells* us -- we contain the Divine breath!

*... the Lord formed a man (Hebrew: adam) of dust from the ground (Hebrew: adamah), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being* (Genesis 2: 7 NRSV).

As I have already said, Hebrew people believed that we shared our physical space with God, breathing God’s breath, the breath of life which tells us we are alive. Breath is also the origin of Voice and speech, two other Biblical metaphors for God. Moses’ commission came via words (Exodus 3: 4); Samuel heard a voice calling him and God spoke to Elijah on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19: 9). When told God would pass by, what did Elijah see? Nothing – he felt It and heard It. Similarly, in John’s Gospel, God is spoken of as formless creating *Word*. *Ruah* also means “spirit” – that which, in Hebrew thinking, came from God and gave life. Death was the moment when that animating spirit or life left the body -- Jesus “breathed his last” or, alternately, “gave up his spirit” (Matthew 27: 50). Later Greek thinking would give different meanings to the Biblical term Spirit, creating an hierarchical duality between spirit and flesh, unknown in Hebrew thinking; and once God’s Spirit became locked-in as one part of the Godhead and incarnation restricted to the once-and-only Jesus event within the Godhead, the idea of the Divine Spirit or breath, incarnate within everything, including all humanity, giving life and divinity, was lost or sidelined.

While there are certainly images in scripture which picture God as a Being over against us, they can in no way be claimed as having priority or validity over other metaphors, unless we make them so, and they are always only metaphors, not literal descriptions. The Divine response “I am” or “I will become” to Moses’ question also invites metaphors *beyond* the Hebrew or New Testament experience. We need many new metaphors from our contemporary worldview to finish the “I am” sentence with authenticity for today. Feminist theology has searched the scriptures and dug up many maternal images such as a mother hen gathering her chicks, Sophia Wisdom, God as a woman sweeping her house to find the lost coin, and so on. They are not arguing that God is female but that feminine Divine images are used in the Bible alongside male images and *neither* are literal, exclusive or exhaustive. Liberation theology has challenged images of a ruler God siding with the rich and powerful, highlighting instead many overlooked images of Divine justice and love for the poor. Ecological theology challenges the superiority and domination of the human race argued from misreading of the creation story. It finds instead metaphors for the universe as God’s body, with humans a part of this interconnected, pulsing organism whose life-breath is God. Such images forbid the raping of earth for human gain and put *all* creation, including those we label as enemies and objects, *within* God and participating in the divine. Ecological theology also challenges doctrines of salvation that focus exclusively on humans, as if this spectacular world is simply a TV “survivor” set to select out winners, according to whether they believe in an offended God demanding the sacrificial death of his son. Rather than *glorifying* such metaphors built on medieval retribution and outdated cosmology, we need new ones. As Australian physicist Paul Davies says,

I do think people need to feel they're part of something bigger and that there's a meaning and purpose to their lives ... We need to show people that we live in a wonderful universe ... that we are an integral part of it, that what we're doing in our lives is, in a limited sense, useful and purposeful ... therefore, we don't despair but we're not God's agents in the old-fashioned sense, we're not central to God's plan and we don't need to go round killing each other in the name of God. <sup>x</sup>

Rex suggested I might include something on Process Theology which has become, for many, a helpful alternate way to think about God. This will be very sketchy for a huge subject in five minutes. First, let me remind you that, whether we know it or not, all thinking is organized within philosophical descriptions, holding sway at particular times, to explain our world and its meaning. Prior to the Enlightenment, philosophy and theology were one, both negotiated by the Church, but after the Enlightenment, the two drew apart as philosophy described itself independent of God, just as science ceased including God in its theories. English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in the early 1900's came up with a philosophical scheme that rejected the need for such duality. Since the Greeks, Western thought had talked in terms of static discrete "things" -- 'beings', 'substances', 'essences.' Thus the traditional theistic view of God was a perfect, complete, unchanging Being, not influenced by human activity, transcendent to the world and quite different from anything else -- like Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting of the not quite touching fingers of God and Adam. This is why the Fourth Century Church Fathers had problems describing Jesus as God -- how can two different 'substances' -- God stuff and human-stuff -- be one thing? Whitehead proposed instead a system where *everything*, including God, humans and rocks, is a *single* type of reality, not different realities -- everything can be described in the same terms and categories. This single reality, instead of talking about static and permanent "things," is in motion -- a series of discrete dynamic events following each other, the previous event causally affecting the one coming after it. We are not just *one* series of events, however, but a multiplicity of series at any one time -- events taking place in the brain, the digestive system, the emotions -- not all 'experienced consciously' but all contributing to the process of becoming who we are at any time. In this image, we are not some enduring substance or thing from birth to death -- the old idea -- with any change superficial and not part of who we really are, but rather a series of events happening faster than our consciousness, each constantly changing who we are. Everything therefore, is an interconnected flux, effecting and affected by everything else. What enables me to say "I am me" in all this is my memory - we *remember* experiences even though we are no longer the same group of cells or even have the same thoughts.

In grossly simple terms, where is God in this? In process thought, all entities are constantly in the process of becoming something. While each emerging event is influenced by the previous event, that is not all its 'information' -- otherwise we would only repeat the past. . For each becoming event, an 'initial aim' (which process theologians call the Divine lure or persuasion), suggests optimal possibilities for the new event. Becoming events make real choices. We are not 'predetermined' to accept this initial aim, but rather are lured towards this choice which, in optimal circumstances, we *would* choose, yet we do not because we tend to cling to the past. By not taking up God's suggested aim in any event, the Divine aims for our interconnected *world* are therefore *affected and limited*. God's subsequent lures can only be formulated within the limited options our choices have created. Thus God is limited. Even so, God's initial aim is always the *maximum* possibility given the *limits* of the moment. When we *do* repeatedly accept God's offers of novelty in new events, we are in process, moving to richer experiences, becoming more 'like God'. If everything is a single type of reality, *God* is also a series of events, not the old theistic God, unchanged, unchangeable, of different stuff and external to the world; and, since God offers the initial aim in every event in the universe, all events become part of *God's* ever-growing experience, thus available to all future events, and even offered again to us if we have rejected this lure to more richness in the past. None of life's experiences, therefore, are lost to God, but God also changes with the incorporation of new experiences. Whitehead also describes two aspects or poles of God, the "Primordial Nature" or transcendent God beyond our ken and the 'Consequent Nature' or immanent God luring within the world, which gets complicated and beyond our scope for today. Whitehead's model is

called Panentheism -- everything is *in* God – but God is not limited only to this. This differs from Pantheism where everything *is* God.

In summary then:

- all life is in process, changing, developing, growing and dying
- the Divine participates in this changing, changing Itself as well
- humans and other life forms are not things situated in space but active processes ever in relationship and transition in an interconnected world
- everything is connected in this web of life, withy no distinction between humans and other forms of life
- this metaphor supports evolution and science, doing away with a theistic God pulling strings from without. It puts God in the world or, better still, all the world in God
- in answer to evil, the Divine power is good and ever-present, but not omnipotent in the traditional sense. Our choices influence Divine power, so the discussion about God is not “how powerful” but “what kind of power.”<sup>xi</sup>

This is only the tip of the Whiteheadian iceberg, and I don't want to get diverted here into an in depth discussion of this very difficult thinker's ins and outs, but rather see how this different metaphor of the relationship between God and the world might help us today to think beyond the traditional theistic God -- that omnipotent, unchanging, all knowing Being over against us and external to us, determining what is to be. In process thought, we do not need to ask why God causes or allows suffering – God offers the best possibility for each moment, yet we are free to choose otherwise. Since our choices impact everything in an interconnected world, our rejection of God's optimum causes the suffering of others and God in ways we can obviously see and also in ways we can't know. A helpful image is a spider's web. When something disrupts one side of a web, the whole web shakes and must stabilize itself to hold together – what we do and how we choose affects everything. Whitehead's image takes us back to my earlier Hebrew image of sharing world space and breath with God. It also reminds me of John's Gospel with its move, like Process theology, beyond hierarchical and dualistic images -- “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; I have called you *friends* ... love one another ... just as I have loved you” (John 15: 14; 13: 31). When we image ourselves as constantly choosing to work with the Divine lure to mend creation and tend the vineyard, we are no longer estranged, useless sinners before a removed, judgmental God but co-creators in a world that the Creating *Voice* called *good*.

From these pickings, what then is our imaginative task? To *live* life as Jesus recommended -- “I am come that you might have life and have it abundantly” -- and in this lived experience, find new ways and words, new metaphors, albeit limited and always evolving, to describe ourselves in relationship to our time, place, and experience (or not) of a Divine presence. Theology is about finishing the sentence “I am,” realizing that, whatever we say limits the Divine since the very nature of language is to limit and specify. We can't *avoid* using language tools and images but we must remember what they are - limited and limiting products of our particular small grasp on the world. To claim our small vision is universal is bigotry at its worst, or comedy at its best. As Frederick Buechner said:

*Theology is the study of God and his ways. For all we know, dung beetles may study man and his ways and call it humanology. If so, we would probably be more touched and amused than irritated. One hopes that God feels likewise.*<sup>xii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> *Rig Veda*. Quoted in Mascaró, Juan trans. *The Upanishads*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965, 1971, 10

<sup>ii</sup> Xenophanes. Quoted in Bowker, John. *God: a Brief History*. London: DK Publishing, 2002, 15

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<sup>iii</sup> Wren, Brian. *What Language shall I Borrow: Godtalk in Worship; a Male Response to Feminist Theology*. New York: Crossroads, 1989.

<sup>iv</sup> Ps 4:5. Maimonides. *The Guide for the Perplexed*, quoted in Bowker, 220

<sup>v</sup> Hick, John ed. *The Existence of God*. NY: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1964, 225.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid*, 115

<sup>viii</sup> Holloway, Richard, *Doubts and Loves*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001, 28-9

<sup>ix</sup> Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, ed. *The Teaching of Buddha*. Buddhist Promoting Foundation. Tokyo, Japan: Toppan Printing Co, 1987, 138

<sup>x</sup> Paul Davies. Quoted in Trenoweth, Amantha. *The Future of God: personal adventures in spirituality with thirteen of today's eminent thinkers*. Australia: Millennium Books, 1995, 110

<sup>xi</sup> Christ, Carol. P. *She who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003,

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<sup>xii</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking*. London: Collins, 1973, 91.