

The God I don't believe in.

Fairly often I find myself speaking with somebody about their spiritual or religious journey. A lot of times I hear, "Well, I just can't be a part of a religion with a God who lets so much evil happen, allows natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, and doesn't answer prayers. I don't think I believe in God."

My response is usually, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in."

Then, after ten or fifteen minutes, I find myself saying, "Yeah, I don't believe in that God either."

It seems there is a disconnect between the God Jesus himself knows and teaches about, and the God of both the Old Testament and the God of conventional modern Christianity.

Two images of God

First, let's look at two distinct images of God. These have been widely described by Karen Armstrong in her seminal best seller, *A History of God*, and by Marcus Borg in books that include *The God We Never Knew* and *The Heart of Christianity*. One image of God is as a theistic superman, if you will. The other is a panentheistic God.

The Supernatural Theistic God

- Human beings are made in the image of God, according to Scripture, so, God must look a lot like human beings, right? In other words, God is *person-like* ... physical features, sits on a throne, sees and hears, albeit omnipotent.
- So, God is a person-like character with incredible powers.
- This God is also a masculine *Being*.
- God, using *his* superlative powers, created the world.
- Significantly, the world is separate from God ...
- God is "up there" (in heaven) and we are "down here" (on earth).
- God's relationship with the (post-creation) world can best be termed interventionist. That is, from time to time, God personally intervenes to make specific things happen in the world, like miraculously saving a drowning baby or helping a flaming jetliner land without anybody being killed.
- The Hebrew Bible includes many spectacular Divine interventions: for example, making the sun stand still and writing commandments on stone tablets.
- The New Testament also has spectacular interventions by God: Jesus' conception in Mary, God empowering Jesus so he can walk on water

and heal the sick, and, of course, the resurrection and bodily ascension of Jesus.

- Those who hold closely to this supernatural theistic image of God believe that God continues to intervene today, especially in response to prayer.

A second image of God may be described as *Panentheistic*. Although the term *Panentheism* has been used for only about two hundred years, the concept it describes is quite ancient.

A Panentheistic God

- God is *an encompassing Spirit*, rather than a person-like being “out there”.
- God is not separate from the universe and everything; rather the universe and everything is *in God*.
- In Greek, *pan* means everything; *en* means in; and *theism* comes from the work *theos* or God. Hence: *Pan-en-theism* means “everything is in God”.
- In the Bible, this notion is expressed often. One example says that God is “the One in whom we live and move and have our being.” Notice then, we live *in* God, move *in* God, and have our being *in* God.
- God is not “out there” but “right here”.
- God is more than everything, even as everything is in God. So, God is “right here” and “more than right here”.
- *Transcendence* and *immanence* are two dimensions of God associated with *Panentheism*. In sum, *Panentheism* means that God is both “up in heaven” and “everywhere”. Another way of saying the same thing: God is “the More” who is “right here”, always nearby.

World-God Relationship

The real issue between “imaging” God as a *supernatural theistic God* and God as a *panentheistic God* centers on the world-God relationship, or more specifically the humanity-God relationship. In the *panentheist’s* view, God is not distant but immediately present. In the *supernatural theistic* view, God intervenes from afar based on some unknown criteria. One way to describe this difference is to ask, “Is God the direct cause of events (good and bad) or is God a presence permeating our lives?” To put it another way is to ask, Why didn’t God intervene to stop Hitler or the tsunami of Christmas 2005?

Prayer

An obvious question arises when imaging God using the *panentheistic* model. It has to do with the efficacy of prayer. What if God isn’t “out there” receiving and responding (or not) to our prayers. How does prayer work if God doesn’t exercise *his* supernatural powers?

Let me ask this: Do you think God is capricious? By that I mean, is God arbitrary in responding to human petition? In other words, how is it that God can bring good health back to a murderous atheist who has a heart attack, while allowing a Christian girl coming home from Sunday School to be hit and killed by a runaway bus?

While the *supernatural theist* believes God directly intervenes because of prayer, the *panentheist*, for whom prayer is also very important, does not understand how prayer works but knows that extraordinary things do happen through prayer.

Some History

Supernatural theism has come to dominate western Christianity only since the Enlightenment (17th century forward). Before the Enlightenment, God was integral to human experience (*panentheistic*) because God was transcendent and immanent, especially recognized in nature—the beauty of a sunset, the awesome power of storms, the creative genius of life itself.

With the Enlightenment, the universe (including our natural world) became something separate from God, perhaps even something God set in motion like a giant clock governed by myriad cause and effects but without further Divine intervention. This is called Deism.

So, as the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries unfolded, God became removed from the world, those who continued to believe in God saw God more and more “out there” and no longer near by. God became more a *supernatural theistic* God than a God who was present in the fabric of every day life.

The person-like *supernatural theistic* God continues to dominate the conventional image of God today—Michelangelo’s bearded old man with his finger reaching down to *mankind*. For many in the United States, not to believe in *this* God is not to believe in God at all. This is the God still taught to children in most Sunday Schools.

So, like Marcus Borg, when people tell me they cannot relate to a God who is “out there” and who intervenes arbitrarily “down here”, I respond, “That is a God I don’t believe in either.”

What to believe ... How to believe

The word “believe” has undergone a quite a transformation in the past 350 years. Again, the Enlightenment is key. Since the Enlightenment, “to believe” has become associated with “show me the facts”. If you can prove “it”, then I’ll believe “it”.

And yet, “show me the facts” has come to mean for religious understanding accepting a certain doctrine or dogma set down by those in authority. The

“facts” have become what is written in Scripture and what interpreted by the Pharisees of our day. It seems the Reformation has been forgotten.

The God I Do Believe In

Pre-Enlightenment, belief had much more to do with a “knowing in the heart”, in other words, a personal experience of Spirit or God. Remember the beauty of the sunset, the awesome power of storms, the creative genius of life itself? God was intimately a part of life—the One in whom people lived and moved and had their *Being*.

Which brings us back to the God I don't believe in, or rather, the God I do believe in.

The God I image is ever-present—both transcendent and immanent. God is characterized by compassion, forgiveness, justice and love. This is straight from the Jesus story. The character of God, for me, does not have to do with requirements and rewards, heaven verse hell, a judge and lawgiver, and a singular focus on the afterlife. God is actually not about believing at all.

Rather, God invites me into relationship so I can be transformed, so I can become who it is God has already created me to *BE*. I think this is what Jesus is talking about when he says the Kingdom of God is near. All I need do is to turn around, go through the narrow gate, and become a servant of *ALL*.

God, I think, overwhelms me with radical and unconditional grace, which changes how I live my life as a child of God. God, I think, wants me to be awake and aware and intentional about how I express the God within me to the world beyond me. In this way, I and you and others become co-creators and so agents of transformation in the service of God.

So, tell me about the God you don't believe in ...