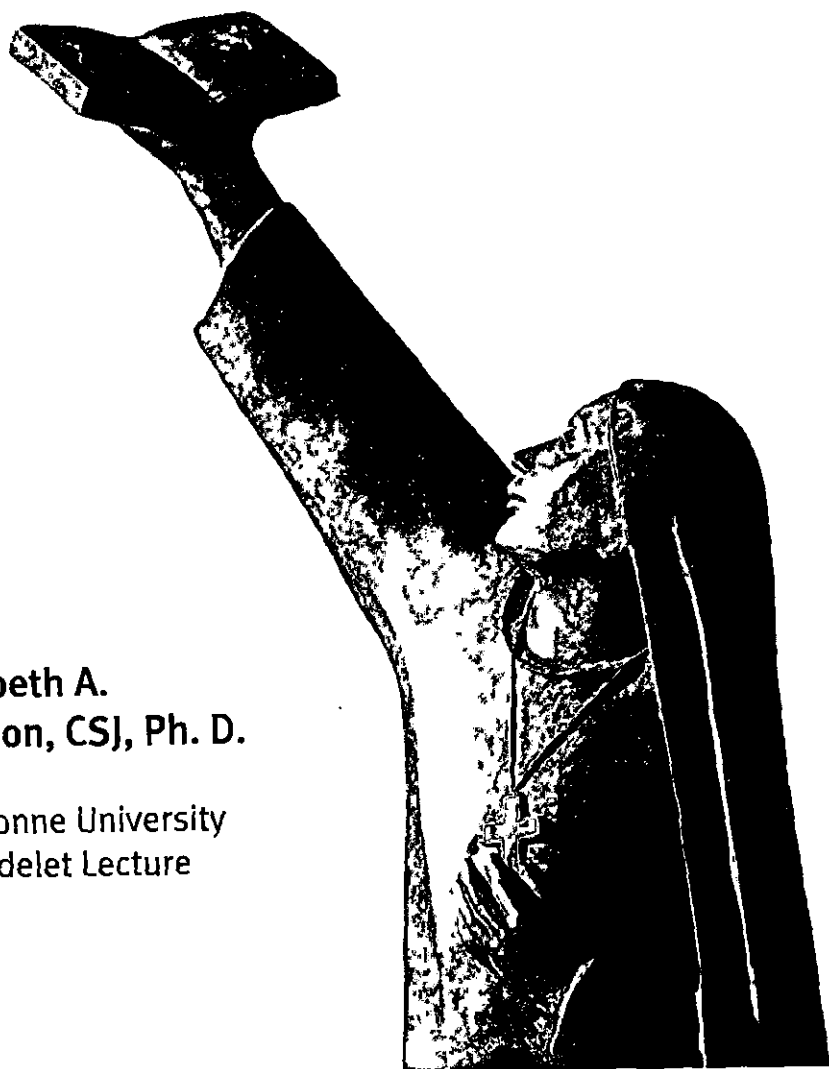


Quest for the Living God



Elizabeth A.
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Fontbonne University
Carondelet Lecture
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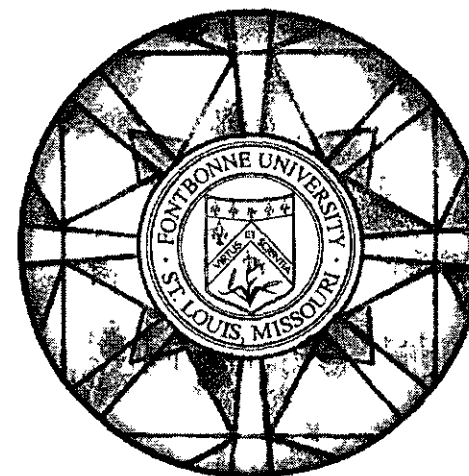
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Quest for the Living God

Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, Ph. D.



Introduction

"I can no other answer make, but, thanks, and thanks." These words from William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* express my heartfelt gratitude to Fontbonne University, to the faculty and President Dr. Dennis Golden for the honor of being this year's Carondelet Lecturer. To be invited to join this growing list of lecturers is invigorating as well as humbling. So—"I can no other answer make, but, thanks, and thanks."¹

The subject of this lecture is the remarkable renaissance occurring today in the field of theology concerning the one whom people call 'God,' the ineffable holy mystery who calls forth and sustains the world with merciful love. Since the mid-twentieth century, among different groups of Christians on every continent, new kinds of religious experiences have been taking place which, upon reflection, are giving rise to new insights about who God is and how God acts which, in turn, call for certain ethical behaviors. Among these new ideas we find the following:

- the notion, developed in the winter of post-war Europe's increasingly atheistic society, that God is the ever-receding horizon of human nature's unrestricted thirst for truth, love and life, the unimaginable, self-giving "Whither" that calls forth our human yearnings;

- the poignant insight, pioneered by German theology in face of the Nazi holocaust of the Jews, that God not only does not will such evil but also shares in the suffering as the cross of Jesus Christ extends through history;
- the intuition arising from extreme misery in Latin America, that the liberating God of life opts for the poor, desiring social change so that there can be bread on the table;
- the wisdom born from women's struggle for dignity that God is in their image too, filled with maternal compassion for the world;
- the sensibility flowing from African Americans' terrible struggle against slavery and Jim Crow that God is the One who breaks chains;
- the realization of Latino/Latina communities that the God of fiesta, flower, and song walks with them in the suffering of daily life;
- the discovery of Christians in Asia who glimpse the generous God of the world's religions;
- the clear perception of people engaged in protecting our vulnerable earth that the circle of divine care extends beyond the human species to include the whole evolving cosmos.²

As a theologian, I find this development fascinating in an intellectual sense. But the issue could not be more crucial in an existential sense as well. It is characteristic of our secular society that many people deny whether God exists at all. For young adults like the students I teach and many here in this audience, the question of God's existence is intertwined with the further issue of *which* God exists: who, if anyone, or what, if anything, is worthy of your life's ultimate trust?

For the individual, 'God' is the one to whom you entrust your entire

1. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act III, scene III (Sebastian to Antonio).

2. For fuller discussion of these theologies, see Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum Pub., 2007).

being. To paraphrase Martin Luther, God is the one on whom you *lean* your heart (depend, incline, rely, rest).³ If the Rock you lean on is too skimpy or narrow to support the weight of your life's desires, it will block rather than promote your spiritual growth. To let your spirit soar like Mary the mother of Jesus rejoicing in God your Savior; or to rage like Job against undeserved suffering; or to whisper in agony like Jesus "why have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:46), receiving no answer but going on without a 'why': such experiences of mature faith are closed to persons who lean on too small a God.

For the church, too, the "which God" question is also all-important. The idea of God symbolizes what a religious community considers to be the greatest truth, the highest good, the most appealing beauty—the best of the best. As such, it becomes the norm, the ideal, by which the community tries to model its life. A war-like God such as the Aztec sun god whose tongue is portrayed as a sharp knife dripping blood will require human sacrifice and promote belligerent behavior. A peace-loving God who counsels believers to forgive even their enemies will evoke active non-violent actions, at least when people are at their best.

The issue of which God one believes in is vital, because cramped notions of the divine lead to pinched human lives, even injustice in the social order. This renaissance I speak of is setting forth rich fare that can nourish mature faith. Tracing even one of these discoveries sets the spirit off on an adult spiritual adventure.

It is troubling, therefore, that in our culture the prevailing view of God is so trivial. Without undue stereotyping, it is fair to say that as referenced in the media, popular language, and even insurance policies, 'God' is an invisible individual of great power who dwells beyond the world but can intervene now and then to bring about changes (a tree falls on your house). Almost always this view envisions God on the model of a monarch at the very peak of the pyramid of being. Without regard for

3. Martin Luther, "The First Commandment," *Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 365.

Christ or the Spirit, it focuses on what trinitarian theology would call the "first person," a single individual, somewhat like ourselves only greater, who governs the cosmos and judges human conduct. Even when this Supreme Being is portrayed with a benevolent attitude, which the best of theology does, "He," for it is always the ruling male who stands for this idea, is essentially remote. Although he loves the world, he is uncontaminated by its messiness. And always this distant lordly law-giver stands at the summit of hierarchical power, reinforcing structures of authority in society, church, and family.

This simplistic view is known today by the shorthand "modern theism." We inherit it as a watered-down version of an idea that can be traced back to the Enlightenment in 18th-century Europe. Arrived at by rational inference from the working of the world, this theistic concept of God provides a foil for modern atheism which denies that such a distinct Supreme Being exists. Recently a particularly aggressive crop of attacks against religion has underscored this connection between modern theism and atheism. Take for example Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* (2006), which sets out the case for atheism based on scientific materialism. In a review essay, the Irish critic Terry Eagleton perceptively noted that one of the main problems with Dawkins' thesis is that he envisions God "if not exactly with a white beard, then at least as some kind of *chap*, however supersized."⁴ In truth, Dawkins did not spin this superficial "chap" out of thin air. He was drawing on the conventional meaning of 'God' in our culture, and rejecting it. Let it be noted that unlike the fruits of the renaissance I am speaking about, this paltry cultural idea ignores the biblical God who acts in history to heal and redeem, the merciful God revealed in Jesus, the God praised by saints and sought by mystics, the creative Spirit who embraces us with a love nearer to us than we are to ourselves. We need to question whether this invisible, mighty chap in the heavens might not really be God at all.

4. Terry Eagleton, "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching," *London Review of Books* Vol. 28, No. 20 (19 October 2006).

In the fifth century, the African bishop St. Augustine addressed God as "O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new."⁵ My point in this lecture is that in our day, this ancient Beauty is being freshly understood in multiple ways, which open new avenues to mature faith for individuals and new challenges for the church as a community. Shortly we will scout three of these frontiers. But first, to equip us for the journey, we need to take hold of three precious tools, three rules that must guide any talk about God. Drawn from medieval theology, these guidelines are held in common by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology and about them there is little dispute. Like a GPS device, they steer us on the road toward the living God and keep us from veering off toward the "chap."



Rules of Engagement

1. The first and most basic prescript is this: the reality of the living God is beyond all imagination. "God" is literally incomprehensible. The human mind can never classify the divine in word or image no matter how true, beautiful, or exalted these might be. This is not to say we are left without clues. The world itself acts as a great pointer. And if you inhabit a faith community with its narrative tradition and rituals, you can speak from this experience about the living God. Christians live by the story that God has drawn near in Jesus Christ, becoming human like us to heal, liberate, and open up the future. While we are not vague about what we believe, even here, as the apostle Paul eloquently put it, we see only dimly, as if looking in a dark, cracked mirror (1 Cor 13:12). The living God is beyond our imagination.

The old story of Augustine on the beach provides a graphic illustration. It seems that one day the bishop was walking along the shore,

5. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10, chap. 27.

puzzling over some point about the Trinity. Deep in thought, he half-watched a small child repeatedly filling a pail at the water's edge and pouring the water into a hole dug in the sand. Intrigued, Augustine finally asked the child what he was doing. "Trying to put the sea into my hole," was the reply. "You can't do that; it won't fit," said the adult with common sense. To which the child replied, "Neither can you put the mystery of the Trinity into your mind; it won't fit." [The child of course was an angel]. Like the sea which cannot be drunk dry, the holy mystery surpasses whatever we can understand and account for in terms of our human categories. This led Augustine to write: "If you have understood, then it is not God" ("*Si comprehendis, non est Deus.*")⁶ To use another water metaphor developed by Karl Rahner, we are like a little island surrounded by a great ocean; we make forays into the sea, but the depths of the ocean forever exceed our grasp. It is a matter of the livingness of God.

2. Consequently, there is a second ground rule: no expression for God can be taken literally. None. Our language is like a finger pointing to the moon, not the moon itself. To equate the finger with the moon or to look at the finger and not perceive the moon is to fall into error.

Catholic theology has traditionally explained the indirect way God-language works with the theory of analogy. Based on the doctrine of creation, analogy holds that all creatures participate in some way in the overflowing goodness, truth, and beauty of the One who made them. Therefore, something of the creature's excellence can direct us back to God. In the process, however, as the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) taught, whatever similarity we might find between creatures and God, the dissimilarity is "always ever greater." Analogy operates with this realization, putting words about God through a threefold wringer: it affirms, negates, and then reaffirms [negates that negation itself].

Take, for example, the term good. Our understanding of what

"good" means arises from our experience of goodness in the world. We experience good persons, good pleasures, good weather, etc. From these we derive a concept of goodness which we then *affirm* of God who is the Creator of all these good things: God is good. But God is infinite, so we need to remove anything that smacks of restriction. Thus we *negate* the finite way goodness exists in the world, shot through with limitation: God is not good the way creatures are good. But still, God is good, so we *reaffirm*: God is good in a supereminent way as Source of all that is good. At this point our concept of goodness cracks open. We literally cannot conceptualize what we are saying, for we have no direct earthly experience of anything that is the Source of all goodness. Yet the very saying of it ushers our spirit toward the presence of the living God who transcends both assertion and negation in what mystics refer to as "brilliant darkness." We are left on our knees in adoration.

Rather than analogy, Protestant theology tends to use metaphor to explain the indirect character of God-language. "A mighty fortress is our God": the play of metaphor starts with a literal base, then extends its literal meaning until it is logically quite absurd but nonetheless leads to a kind of insight. There is an "is/is not" tension at work in metaphor. It is true without being literally a fact. Whatever theory is used, whether analogy, metaphor, symbol, or some other, this second ground rule alerts us that we are always naming *toward* God, using fragments from the world to point to the infinite mystery who dwells within and embraces the world but always exceeds our grasp.

3. "From this," Thomas Aquinas argues, articulating the third ground rule, "we see the necessity of giving to God many names."⁷ If human beings were capable of expressing divine fullness in one straight-as-an-arrow name, the multiplication of names in all the world's religions would make no sense. But there is no one such name. Rather, in jubila-

6. Augustine, *Sermo* 52, c. 1, n. 16; in Migne, PL 38.360.

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. I, 31:4.

tion and praise, lamentation and mourning, thanksgiving and petition, crying out and the final falling into silence, we name holy mystery with a symphony of phrases taken from the human, animal, and cosmic world.

These rules of engagement are not well observed in the contemporary world. Tidal waves of words about the deity pour forth in society and even in the church with no accompanying awareness that the subject of all this talk exceeds our grasp. By contrast, these principles work gently to free our imagination from the paltry model of popular culture, making it possible that we might discover the holy mystery of God who is totally beyond, historically, with, and graciously within us and all things. Equipped with these ground rules we turn to three instances of the rich quest for the living God in our day.



Liberation Theology

Consider the intuition about God that has arisen in the context of massive suffering due to poverty and the struggle for justice. Pioneered in Latin America where it is called liberation theology, this view is now being articulated in Africa and Asia as well as by minority groups in more economically developed countries. The kind of poverty we are talking about afflicts millions upon millions of people in this world, the 75% of people who have to survive on 20% of the world's resources. And the gap is growing wider. This massive poverty, as the Medellin conference of Latin American Catholic bishops declared in 1968, is an outrage that cries to heaven. For it is an instrument of death. Lack of food and drinkable water, lack of shelter, education and medical care, lack of employment, all add up to short lives of misery that give the lie to human dignity. Death comes slowly, by inches, due to unhealthy conditions that cannot sustain life; And death also comes quickly, by violence, given the

political repression necessary by the state to maintain this structured inequity.

What view of God emerges in the midst of such immense suffering? The notion that God is not neutral. God is not on the side of the oppressor and oppressed in the same way, blessing the status quo, and urging the poor toward patient obedience under trial because their reward will be great in heaven. Rather, taking a cue from the story of the Exodus, liberation theology notes that instead of siding with the powerful Pharaoh of Egypt, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob opted for the miserably enslaved Hebrew people. The words spoken to Moses out of the burning bush carry the essence of this insight: "I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt; I have heard their cry because of their task masters; I know well what they are suffering; therefore I have come down to deliver them" (Ex 3:7-8). The verb 'know' in this litany of divine compassion refers to an experiential kind of knowing, as in "Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived" (Gen 4:1). The story of Exodus testifies that the Holy One sees, hears, "feels" the suffering of these slaves, and so comes to set them free. No wonder the bush was burning.

Liberation theology takes a further cue from the gospel story of Jesus, whose entire ministry makes clear that this same God is faithful in opting for those who are marginalized. The Messiah's healings, exorcisms, and inclusive table companionship, illuminated by his parables and kingdom sayings, destabilize the prevailing norms of who is first and who is last. Encounter with him makes divine love experientially available to those who have been excluded. In a special way, Jesus' own bitter, violent death reveals God to be on the side of this particular victim, unjustly executed by the power of the state. By raising him to new life in glory, the Spirit of God not only vindicates Jesus' own person and ministry but also irrevocably pledges that there will be a blessed future for all the violated and the dead.

In the light of this history of revelation, liberation theology comes

to a radical realization: God does not want humankind to suffer degradation. Far from happening according to a divine plan, the sufferings of poor, oppressed, and marginal peoples are contrary to divine intent. The political, economic, and social structures that create and maintain such degradation are instances of social sin. For God is a God of life, who creates the world out of love, and glories when the beloved creation flourishes, rather than when it is violated. Yes, crosses keep on being set up throughout history; tear-stained, terrified, emaciated, bloody faces keep appearing. Still, Christians claim the world has been redeemed. If this is true, argues liberation theology, then the world of the poor should look a little more like it.⁸

The second century bishop and theologian Irenaeus crafted a marvelous axiom—*Gloria Dei, vivens homo*: the glory of God is the human being, the whole human race, every individual person, fully alive.⁹ In our day Archbishop Oscar Romero, who gave his life in solidarity with the poor in El Salvador, reformulated this maxim to read—*Gloria Dei, vivens pauper*: the glory of God is the poor person fully alive.¹⁰ Whenever persons are caught in the grip of unjust suffering, where the life of multitudes is throttled, gagged, slain, or starved, there the Holy One is to be found, in gracious solidarity with the oppressed, calling the oppressors to conversion, giving birth to courage for protest, struggling to bring life out of death.

What kind of behavior follows from relating to the liberating God of life? The praxis of justice and peace. We realize that we are called to be responsible partners with God in the work of redemption. Make no mistake: alleviating suffering, or what liberation theology calls the preferential option for the poor, is much more than social work on a human level.

8. For superb compendium of liberation theology see Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) with essays on all major doctrines including God, Christ, and the Spirit; see especially I. Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," 580–603.

9. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.20.7; see also 3.20.2 and 5.3.

10. Cited in Jon Sobrino, *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 16.

It is an absolutely God-centered ethic, responding to the call to partner God in the great work of redemption. And unlike dualistic understandings of old which separated body and soul, redemption applies also to this world where "foretastes" of the future reign of God need to materialize even here, even now, in bread on the table, and unjust economic systems challenged. In walking this path, we encounter anew the God of life, who is in compassionate solidarity with those who suffer from injustice and violence.



Feminist Theology

Consider next the idea of God arising on every continent as women awakened to their historical situation as the "second sex."¹¹ Consider these UN statistics: ½ population, ¾ working hours, ⅓ salary, ⅓ land ownership, ⅔ illiterate adults, with children ¾ starving people. In addition to that, women are raped, prostituted, trafficked, battered, and murdered to a degree that is not mutual. Sexism is rampant on a global scale. In the church, too, doctrine & creed, law & custom, rituals and the leadership of church office are male-defined. A terrible bias against the dignity of women's humanity has plagued even the most influential thinkers—all male. In the second century Tertullian taught that women are the gateway of the devil; just as Eve "softened up with her cajoling words he whom the devil himself could not attack," so too all women tempt men into sin.¹² Augustine taught that while women's souls were capable of being the image of God equally with that of men, their female bodies were not, so that in the concrete, women can be considered to be the image of

11. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1952); the classic text describing women's subordination in western culture.

12. Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum*, libri due I, 1; in Migne, PL I, 1418b–1419a; cited in Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1983) 39.

God only when taken together with man who is her head.¹³ And Thomas Aquinas' defined woman as a "defective male," misbegotten when the male seed at conception is not up to full strength.¹⁴

Reclaiming the goodness of being female, millions of women are now experiencing that being a woman, a human being of the female sex, is a blessing, not a defect. As the African-American poet Ntozake Shange had one of her characters say: "I found God in myself and I loved her, loved her fiercely."¹⁵ Articulating this experience (that God loves women), feminist theology is a form of liberation theology that engages in a critique not only of male domination but of all the ways people lord it over one another. It embraces an alternative vision of a new community, one of equality and mutuality between sexes, races, classes, all people, and between human beings and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision into reality.

On this frontier, women have come to see that the traditional, almost exclusive image of God as an elderly, white, male king, father, or lord is basically an idol. The well-known paintings on the Sistine chapel ceiling in Rome are a prime example, depicting God as old, white, well-fed, and male, the epitome of power in Michelangelo's society (note that race and class as well as sex enters into this picture). This graven image has seriously harmful effects. It gives rise to the idea that maleness has more in common with divinity than femaleness. (A male colleague once pointed to a great white marble sculpture of the Trinity over the altar in a Florida church and whispered, "That's God up there—I'd recognize him anywhere!"). Furthermore, the exclusively male image of God privileges men and systems of male rule. In Mary Daly's famous phrase, "If God is male, then the male is God."¹⁶ And it robs women of spiritual power. In

13. Augustine, *The Trinity* 12.7.10, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991) 328.

14. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 92, art. 1; cited in Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson, eds., *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 74-77.

15. Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Macmillan, 1976) 63.

16. Mary Daly, "Feminist Post-Christian Introduction," *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York:

fact, women can take full ownership of our dignity as created in the image of God only if we abstract ourselves from our bodies and our sexuality.

Taking cues from scripture and tradition as well as new experiences of their own blessedness, women are taking the risk to name toward God using female metaphors. The mystery of the living God is, of course, neither male nor female but Creator of both in the divine image and likeness. However, if God created women in the divine image and likeness, then we can return the favor, and speak about the holy mystery in the image of women in as adequate and inadequate a way as in the image of men. Accordingly, feminist theology discovers God as the powerfully creative feminine Spirit (*ruah*); and as Holy Wisdom (*Sophia*), the intensely female personification of Israel's God's who leads the people across the Red Sea, and against whom evil does not prevail. In the story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave who mothered Abraham's first son but was driven into the harsh desert by Sarah's jealousy, African American womanist theologians glimpse the God who helps women make a way where there is no way and who, when there is no possibility of liberation, helps them strongly to survive.¹⁷ The Bible also portrays God in maternal images: pregnant, crying out in labor, nursing, carrying on her shoulders, comforting, never abandoning. She is also teacher, midwife, liberator, female beloved, hostess, justly angry prophet, sister, female friend, in a word: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, the Holy One of Blessing, Blessed be She. The path of such theology leads away from the unrelated, monarchical God of "chap theology" toward the living God whose love encircles the world in undying embrace.¹⁸

We need to be wary of falling into a trap here, of using female images only when speaking about God's nurturing qualities. This traditional

Harper & Row, 1975) 38.

17. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 15-33.

18. For full discussion of the significance of female naming toward God, with multiple examples, see Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 2002).

gender essentialism divides human characteristics into male and female portions, assigning to men the qualities of reason, initiative, and courage, which fits them for life in the public realm, while defining women with qualities of emotionality, receptivity, and ability to nurture, which relegate them to the private sphere. In place of this dualism, women lay claim to the whole range of human qualities, according to their unique gifts, and urge men too to explore what they have lost under this biased description. Men can be sensitive and nurture; woman can be smart and lead. Both can reflect their Creator in their diversity of gifts.

The dynamism of female God symbols, uttered in contexts of injustice, empowers women's dignity and challenges whatever demeans it. Referencing Irenaeus, feminist theologians now say: *Gloria Dei, vivens femina*: the glory of God is woman, fully alive. Believing in God this way, we will act to build a world where violence against women will cease and where women of all races and classes will be mutual partners with men rather than subordinates, auxiliaries, or marginal objects. Walking this path, we cast our lot with divine compassion present in the midst of the degradation and death specifically of women. Because we are walking with God, hope awakens that evil will not have the last word. Rather, She will.



Ecological Theology

Consider the idea of God being rediscovered in the context of new knowledge of the natural world. Cosmology sets the origin of the universe at approximately 13.7 billion years ago, in the rather inelegantly named Big Bang. It then traces cosmic evolution through the formation of galaxies with their billions of living and dying stars, surrounded by oceans of dark space. Our own solar system came into being 5 billion

years ago, coalescing from the debris of older stars that exploded in their death throes. Evolutionary biology traces the emergence and evolution of life on this planet, uncovering the expanding richness of life in its diversity of species and its thrust, through false starts, dead-ends and extinctions, toward the emergence of human persons. With the coming of *homo sapiens* a trifling 40,000 years ago, the possibility of rational thought and language, the possibility of love—and hatred—emerged on this planet. Truly, we human beings have emerged from the universe; we are made of stardust, and are deeply connected in kinship with the whole community of living beings on this planet in this unimaginably old, vast, dynamic and complex universe.

Even as we make these discoveries, our human species is inflicting unprecedented devastation on our home planet, havoc which has reached crisis proportions. You know the litany: Holes in the ozone layer, clear-cut forests, denuded soils, polluted air and waters, and over all the threat of global warming and nuclear conflagration. The widespread destruction of ecosystems has as its flip side the distinction of species. By a conservative estimate, in the last quarter of the 20th century, 10% of all living species went extinct. We are living in a time of a great dying off. Magnificent animals and intricate plants that took millions of years to evolve are disappearing forever, and they will never come back again. Their perishing sends an early-warning signal of the death of the planet itself as a dwelling place for life. In the blunt language of the World Council of Churches, "The stark sign of our times is a planet in peril at our hands."¹⁹

Such discoveries about the physical world, our wonder at it and our waste of it, are galvanizing human behavior to "go green." In the process, an ancient idea of God is being rediscovered, namely, the Spirit

19. World Council of Churches, Canberra Assembly, "Giver of Life Sustain Your Creation!" Section I, in Michael Kinnamon, ed., *Signs of the Spirit* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich.: 1991) 55; for details of ecological damage, see James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) chap. 1 and 2; for rich discussion of ethics, including difficulties inhering in the concept of stewardship, see Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997).

of God who dwells within the natural world and energizes its evolution from within. Theology in the west has not done a good job in attending to the Holy Spirit. As one wag put it, the Spirit has been the Cinderella of theology, in the kitchen, doing the work, but getting none of the credit. But the Nicene Creed confesses the Spirit to be "Lord and giver of life"—*vivificantem*, the vivifier. The stunning ecological world opened up to our wonder and being destroyed by our waste awakens new imagination of this presence of God within and around the emerging, struggling, living, and dying community of life. At the end of his popular book *A Brief History of Time*, wheelchair-bound scientist Stephen Hawking asks a famous question: "What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?"²⁰ In the integrity of his adherence to atheism, he leaves the question open. Christian faith answers that it is *the Creator Spirit* who breathes the power of life, bringing forth this exuberant world. This refers to divine action not just in the beginning, but continuing even now, as the universe continues to evolve and take shape into the future, promised but unknown. As Paul preached in Athens, this is the God in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Now we rediscover that instead of the natural world being divorced from the divine, it bears the mark of the sacred and has itself a spiritual radiance. Sacramental theology in the Catholic tradition has always taught that simple earthy things—bread and wine, water, oil, the embodied, sexual relationship of marriage—can be bearers of divine grace. This is so because to begin with, Earth itself is the primordial sacrament, bodying forth the gracious presence of God. Ecological theological spins Irenaeus' axiom once again to declare *Gloria Dei, vivens terra*: the glory of God is the Earth, fully alive.

What kind of behavior arises from this view of God? The action of love and assertive, responsible care for the Earth. For this is not a God centered on human beings alone, but one who loves the grasses, the

20. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988) 174.

worms, the great gray whales, the whole natural world. Realizing this, we see that a moral universe limited to the human community no longer serves the future of life. Pope John Paul II enunciated this in a stunning principle: "respect for life and for the dignity of the human person must extend also to the rest of creation."²¹ We need to respect life and resist the culture of death not only among humankind but also among "otherkind" all species. The moral goal is to ensure vibrant life in community for all. For this planet is the dwelling place of God, who is creating the whole wondrous universe as a sacrament of divine beauty. An ecological ethic is the best way to partner God's Spirit in preserving creation.



Conclusion

Anthropologists have taught us that religion emerged with tools and fire.²² Early humans seem to have lived in the presence of numinous power, which they could not control but with which they could be in tune. The way they buried their dead with such care, often flexing the body into a fetal position for new birth and enclosing artifacts for future use, is one indication of this sense of something or someone "more." Over time this basic awareness of the sacred developed into all manner of organized religions, which channeled human relation to the divine in different cultural milieus. The enormous diversity of beliefs and practices over millennia now create the subject matter of the history of religions. Even a brief glance gives evidence that the ongoing search for the living God has been a persistent activity of the human spirit.

21. John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," in Drew Christiansen and Walter Grazer, eds. *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996) 222.

22. D. Bruce Dickson, *The Dawn of Belief: Religion in the Upper Paleolithic of Southwestern Europe* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990); and Timothy Insoll, *Archaeology, Ritual, Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

We have been scouting three frontiers in contemporary religious experience where the fire of divine compassion is flaring forth with unsuspected strength in our own day. The God whose universality is expressed precisely in opting for the last, lowest, and least of the poor, and whose signature deed is liberation; the God who loves women and can be addressed in female images of comfort, power, and might; the God who is the utterly imaginative ongoing Creator of this evolving universe, dwelling within it—in each instance, and in others we have not had time to consider, a clear path flows from belief in the living God to prayer and action that intensify religious awe and responsibility. In my view, what is coming into focus here are contemporary interpretations of the 'abba' whose reign Jesus preached and embodied. It is a grace of our time that this renaissance is available to feed the souls of contemporary people.

Circling back to the point I made in the beginning, this is hugely relevant to the quest of young adults for a worthy God to believe in. In the fourteenth century the German Dominican theologian named Meister Eckhart preached a sermon in which he said a puzzling thing: "So therefore let us pray to God that we might be free of God."²³ More recently the German theologian Dorothee Soelle retranslated it: "I pray God to rid me of God," and this is the way it appears on cards and posters and in the work of spiritual writers today. Why would anyone who is trying to live a life of faith say such a prayer? Why would you want to eliminate God the way you rid your house of termites? Because, Meister Eckhart thought, the narrow, puny notions of 'God' many of us carry around in our imagination are damaging to faith. Our God is too small. If we could see beyond our little inadequate deity and glimpse the reality of the living God, we might laugh a little and perhaps even weep a little. And then we could set out on the adventure of discovering the holy mystery truly worthy of our lives. The fruit of that search will be faith that leans our heart on the living God, very source of life, who will anchor

23. Meister Johann Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), Sermon 52.

us so deeply that we will be sustained even in our sufferings while being impelled toward loving mission in the world.

I close with lines from the literary artist, Christopher Fry, who says poetically what my poor prose has tried to put before you. In his play, *A Sleep of Prisoners*, a soldier escaping from a burning church declares:

*Dark and cold we may be, but this is no winter now.
The frozen misery of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move.
The thunder is the thunder of the flocs, the thaw, the flood,
the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now, when wrong comes up to face us
everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take the longest stride of soul men
[& women] ever took.
Affairs are now soul size. The enterprise ... is exploration into
God.²⁴*

24. Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951) 47-48.



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