

Xavier University

Exhibit

Faculty Scholarship

Theology

2018

Loving God, Holy Mystery: Multiplying Our Images of God

Kenneth R. Overberg S.J.
overberg@xavier.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/theology_faculty



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

A brief but insightful article that helps us speak of God, emphasizing the value of multiplying our images of God. Different images help us appreciate different aspects of God, who is always greater than any one description. Indeed, the Bible offers a wonderful variety of images of God.

This Book Chapter/Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Theology at Exhibit. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Exhibit. For more information, please contact exhibit@xavier.edu.

Loving God, Holy Mystery

Multiplying Our Images of God

Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J.

In the hospital's intensive care unit, I sat next to a dying Jesuit friend. I knew he was falling into the abyss of death, yet I also "knew" he would be OK, because ultimately he was falling into the loving abyss of God.

God, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of all life, is the center of every believer's life. But how can we speak of God?(1) What images do we find helpful in trying to describe that which cannot be fully described? What is *your* favorite image of God? What do we say of God in times of suffering?

Relationship with God is the heart of our spiritual-moral life. The images we have of God play an important role in how this relationship develops. If, as we grew up, we were taught about a God who judges and punishes us, then our relationship might be characterized by fear or even avoidance. If, instead, God's love and forgiveness had been emphasized, we probably have a very different relationship with God, one characterized by warmth and acceptance.

The Eucharist and other sacraments and private prayer continue to influence our images of God and so shape our relationship. Other experiences, past and present, also influence how we think and feel about God, for example, if we had an abusive father or

if we have experienced a deep and unconditional love. Suffering frequently raises profound questions about God: “Why did God do this?” or even “Is there a God?”

A wise Scripture scholar(2) once said that we need to *multiply* our images of God. Different images help us to appreciate different aspects of God, who is always greater than any one description. But each image can give us a glimpse of the Holy Mystery, the source and goal of all life, and so nurture our relationship with God. The Bible itself offers us a wonderful variety of images of God, including fire, shepherd, warrior, shelter, light, bread of life, love, the Holy One. Two that we may take for granted are woman and man: God created humans in God’s image; in the divine image God created them; male and female God created them (see Gen 1:27). Human beings are icons of God.

One perhaps surprising image is God as rock! Listen to the psalmist: “I love you, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge” (Psalm 18:1-2). “[God] alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken” (Psalm 62:2). Hardly an image of tenderness or compassion! Yet the psalmist is comfortable calling God a rock. The prophet Isaiah also: “Trust in the LORD forever! For the LORD is an eternal rock” (26:4).

Other passages in the Bible speak of God in maternal terms. “You forgot the God who gave you birth” (Deuteronomy 32:18). Similarly, the unknown prophet known as Second Isaiah with the people in exile had God ask, “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you” (49:15). In the Wisdom literature especially (see Wisdom 7:7-8:8 for

example) and throughout the Bible there are many feminine references and images, some based on biological activity (like giving birth) and others on women's cultural activities (like being a midwife).

The prophet Hosea describes God as a gentle parent. "When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the farther they went from me.... Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, who took them in my arms; I drew them with human cords, with bands of love" (11:1-4).

Jesus calls God *Abba* ("Daddy") and two of his parables pair feminine and masculine images of God: a woman looking for a lost coin and a father looking for a lost son (see Luke 15). These and other parables and teachings point to an intimate, loving relationship with a merciful and faithful God.

All these biblical images of God may help us appreciate characteristics of God like gentle compassion, faithfulness, strength, love. Still, along with the images must come some caution. "If we use words hewn from the things around us for God, we reduce [God] to a thing around us."⁽³⁾ God is always more, always other. God is neither male nor female, neither shepherd nor rock!

In many of his writings, theologian Karl Rahner, S.J., offers a different kind of image and so helps us to think carefully about the reality behind all images. He never ceases to remind us that God is more than we can ever explain or articulate. God is Holy Mystery, the Incomprehensible One, the Loving Abyss.

In the chapter on Rahner in her *Quest for the Living God*, Elizabeth Johnson concisely presents the heart of Rahner's insight. "This one holy mystery is the ineffable

God who while remaining eternally a plentitude—infinite, incomprehensible, inexpressible—wishes to self-communicate to the world, and does so in the historically tangible person of Jesus Christ and in the grace of the Spirit so as to become the blessedness of every person and of the universe itself.”(4)

Johnson spells out this remarkable sentence emphasizing two parts: God’s transcendence and God’s immanence. Transcendence speaks of God’s otherness, always greater and more, not a particular being (like you and I and all other creatures) but the ground of being (Unlimited Being). Because God is transcendent, God can be immanent, meaning intimate nearness, within all that is.

God’s self-communication has taken place in Jesus, “the human person in whom God’s irrevocable union with humanity in self-giving love is decisively achieved and revealed.”(5) God’s self-communication also takes place in God’s Spirit given directly to all human beings—what we call grace.

Despite his emphasis on God as mystery, Rahner still uses aspects of our physical world to point us in the right direction. Those who live near an ocean (or have visited one) experience the endless immensity of the water when looking out toward the horizon. Rahner comments that we humans are “forever occupied with the grains of sand along the shore” where we dwell “at the edge of the infinite ocean of mystery.”(6) Sitting at the edge of the Grand Canyon and peering into the depths can also help make real the meaning of an abyss.

Rahner’s emphasis on Holy Mystery may be especially helpful in times of doubt, darkness, and suffering. In the distant past the Psalmist described suffering as a dark

abyss (Psalm 88); Rahner describes God as a loving abyss, an abyss deserving our awe, wonder, and worship.

First he speaks of Jesus' experience of the abyss:

“There is Jesus, a human being who loves, who is faithful unto death, in whom all of human existence, life, speech and action, is open to the mystery which he calls his Father and to which he surrenders in confidence even when all is lost. For him the immeasurable dark abyss of his life is the Father's protecting hand. And so he holds fast to love for human beings and also to his one hope even when everything seems to be being destroyed in death, when it no longer seems possible to love God and human beings.”(7)

Then Rahner turns to his own experience:

“What could I put in the place of Christianity? Only emptiness, despair, night, and death. And what reason do I have to consider this abyss as truer and more real than the abyss of God? It is easier to let oneself fall into one's own emptiness than into the abyss of the Blessed Mystery. But it is not more courageous or truer. This truth, of course, shines out only when it is also loved and accepted since it is the truth which makes us free and whose light consequently begins to shine only in the freedom which dares all to the very height.... [This truth] gives me the courage to believe in it and to call to it when all the dark despairs and lifeless voids would swallow me up.”(8)

Multiplying our images of God can enrich and enliven our relationship with God. The image beyond other images—God as Holy Mystery, Loving Abyss—captures the wonder of God and offers hope and light in times of doubt and darkness, especially as we sit at the edge of death.

ENDNOTES

1. See “Within the Holy Mystery” by Michael J. Buckley, S.J. in *A World of Grace*, edited by Leo O’Donovan, S.J., New York: Crossroad, 1987, pp. 31-49.
2. Barbara E. Bowe, R.S.C.J. See her *Biblical Foundations of Spirituality*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
3. Buckley, p. 41.
4. Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, New York: Continuum, 2007, p. 43.
5. Otto H. Hentz, S.J., “Anticipating Jesus Christ: An Account of our Hope” in O’Donovan, p. 113.
6. Karl Rahner, S.J., “The Experience of God Today” in *Theological Investigations XI*, New York: Seabury Press, 1974, p. 159.

7. Karl Rahner, S.J., "Why Am I a Christian Today?" in *The Practice of Faith*, New York: Crossroad, 1986, p. 8.

8. Karl Rahner, S.J., "Thoughts on the Possibility of Belief Today" in *Theological Investigations V*, Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966, pp. 8-9.

(This article is taken from *Disciples: Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, published in 2018 by Lectio Publishing, LLC; available at <https://www.lectiopublishing.com>.)