

Images of God

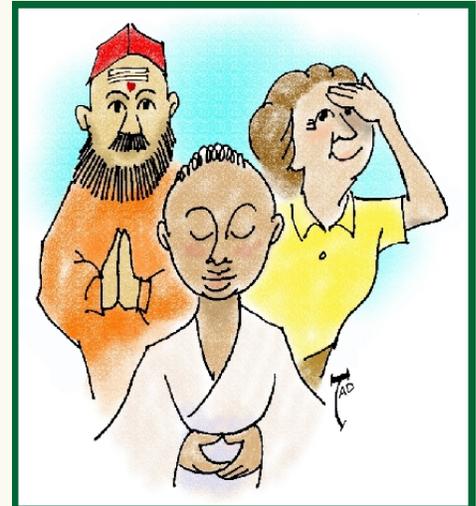
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Practically everyone imagines God, or Allah, or Yahweh, or Higher Power, etc. Even those who don't believe in God imagine the being they do not believe exists. What we imagine about God usually changes throughout life, and with each change comes new questions about this God. Why do our images change? And is there anything we need to do about it?

Definitions

First, I should define what I mean by these "images" of God. Briefly, I mean the mental images we have feelings about. More precisely, these are the elements in our imagination that arise from, sustain, and evoke elements in our emotions. To use the terms of Bernard Lonergan, they are "affective-laden images"¹ or "symbols"² in our consciousness.

The images in our imagination may be *static* or *dramatic*. Static images stand still—like our words *stand and status*. They depict one fixed dimension or aspect, much like a painting does. Dramatic images move along. They depict a sequence of unfolding situations, much like a play does. Below, we will first explore our static images of God. Following that, we will explore our dramatic images of God.



Static Images of God

While static images of God are like paintings that do not change, we can change. As we grow up and widen our perspectives, we normally change our image of God. It's as if we lay aside an old painting for a new one.

Stages of Maturity

Moreover, recent psychological studies show that we mature not gradually but along certain steps. So we can expect that at each new step, our image of God will have a corresponding certain quality.

Throughout these changes, we generally imagine God as a divine being that is above and beyond us, that created the universe, and is altogether more powerful and good than any one of us. A shorthand way of saying this is that God *transcends* us. But we also transcend ourselves in ways that develop as we grow up. We become bigger, more powerful, more intelligent, perhaps more wise and loving.

So our very image of “transcending” changes. And because, these developments happen not gradually, but in sudden leaps, as we undergo paradigm shifts about life, our images of God expand rather dramatically with each leap.

1. Children think of transcending themselves as being able to take action, to cause results. They see their parents as having the power to make things happen, to compel, to protect. They understand the authority of a parent’s word. Hence, God is the invisible taker of action. God is a monarch, a king. God is great. What God says goes. God is in **control**. When children pray, they ask God to make things happen.
2. Teenagers think of transcending themselves as also being able to understand things. Having discovered the power of their own intelligence, they want explanations. They ask why and how and what for. They imagine God's transcendence now as Supreme Intelligence. God designed the universe. He knows all things. In God there is no confusion. God has complete **understanding**. They pray with closed eyes as they meditate on the deeper reasons for things.
3. Young adults think of transcending themselves as also being realistic. Having discovered that people can live in unreal worlds, they want to live in the real world rather in some myth about the world. They want to verify that explanations are actually correct. Hence they ask the question whether God is real or is just a convenient human idea that keeps people doing what’s right. What counts is the **truth**. If it is true that God created all things, then there's a real connection among all things. When they say, “Everything happens for a reason,” they imagine that the reason is in the mind of God. God is transcendent because he is above all falsehood, myths, and lies. They tend to pray with eyes open, contemplating ordinary life as, in truth, all connected in God.
4. Older adults think of transcending themselves as also caring for others. They take on responsibilities. They volunteer; they raise families; they try to improve themselves. They see God as **caring** and as calling us to be better persons. God is good. God is a kind father, a caring mother, who teaches us how to do right. Their prayer seeks to know how to care for others and to receive the power to express that care.
5. Seniors think of transcending themselves as also “being” in love. Besides love as care, they discover **love as union**. Elders with a long-term spouse or friend think of themselves as halves of a larger whole. They move beyond trying to be better persons. Rather, they “Let go and let God.” God is company in their struggle. What they do

is prompted by God, carried out in God, and left in the hands of God. Their prayer is silent acceptance of God as eternally permanent company. They face their mortality with the same sense of surrender to love they have practiced most of their lives. They face the mystery of their death with a quiet confidence that, as Julian of Norwich was fond of saying, "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

You probably have imagined God in many or all of these ways. You may discover that some images are remnants of earlier issues still alive in you, even though you have mostly moved beyond them. Some of this is natural, but some may represent unresolved issues about (1) control, (2) intellectual confusion, (3) truth vs. myth, or (4) care and responsibility. You may also discover that other images are just vague hunches of later issues, even though you have yet to discern in personal experience which aspects of the images resonate best with your ever-present need to be self-transcending.

Facing the Truth

The various images we have about God can be very powerful. This is because they are *images*. That is, they appear in our imagination and evoke certain strong emotions. So our image of God may be frightening, or disappointed, or angry, or impatient, or bereft, or comforting, or enriching, or forgiving, and so on.

In any case, some regular reflection on which image is predominant for you helps you realize that they are only images and that, ultimately, God's way are not our ways. So we cannot rely on our imagination as the sole guide to reveal the truth of things. To seek the truth means being ready for whatever may be so, regardless of what we imagine. We cannot even "test" our image of God by seeing whether this God we imagine meets our deepest needs. Why not? Because no one can be certain of what his or her deepest needs really are.

For these reasons, most religions warn against fixating on any one image of God. Judaism prohibited all images of God. God so transcends them all that any one image will deceive, since it necessarily leaves out far more than it represents. Believers who preach only one image of God—as judge, as distant overseer, as identical to all reality, as an impenetrable cloud—practically ensure that most people won't believe in such a God. People who aware of how life itself is a revealer yet always more mysterious easily dismiss certitudes proclaimed about ultimate realities. We see this in a man who thinks he knows his needs . . . until the day he falls in love. We see it in a woman who frets about many things . . . until the day she brings her firstborn into the world. They receive a revelation about what life is really like.

It is in this sense that the three major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam— are called religions of *revelation*, since they look to God's own self-revelation, not simply human reflection, to know the truth of what God is like and what God is doing. They present these revealed truths as official teachings or "Church doctrines" or "dogmas of the faith." In times of the storms of spiritual desolation, when we cannot count on our imagination nor on our emotions, these truths are solid anchors.

Images of History

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are also called "historical" religions, meaning that they believe God guides them through many periods of history. Their theologians speak of a *salvation history*. They look not exclusively to static *images* of God but also to their own *fluid history* of living out their faith in God. Where a static image tends to set God as something to look at out there, a fluid history is knowledge of story that involves both God and themselves. It is a knowledge of real experiences—their own and that of their ancestors in the faith. Now, as you can see, we are moving to the question of *dramatic images* of God

Dramatic Images of God

Where static images of God depict a fixed attitude in God, dramatic images depict God's ongoing activity in history. To understand the different kinds of dramatic images of God, we should first consider how we almost cannot help but imagine life as drama. For example, In Morgan Llywelyn's *1916: A Novel of the Irish Rebellion*, the young Ned Halloran becomes aware of such a drama:

War and death and babies being born. Ned tried to stretch the horizons of his mind to encompass them all in one world vision. It was the babies, he decided, who made the rest of it bearable, who redeemed the horror adults could perpetrate. A child . . . was created by the same species that manufactured guns and submarines—but with one added element: the Divine Spark, an immortal soul.³

There are many such dramas people might carry in their imaginations. Some include God and some do not. So we will next consider four main kinds of dramatic images that have appeared in history. We will speak of what they have in common as a "World Drama"—the ways people imagine all world process as some sort of drama.⁴

Four World Dramas

1. The Drama of Fate.

The world is an enchanted place. Human life is dominated by the stars, the gods, ghosts, the government, or dumb luck. Superstitions abound.

2. The Drama of Exclusive Autonomy

Given the historical evidence of wars and scandals among religious groups, and despite the shadow of tragedy that falls on our every endeavor, humanity has no alternative but to be autonomous by relying on human reason and good will rather than on belief in God.⁵

3. The Drama of Inclusive Autonomy

Despite the poor showing of religions in history, God does exist. He is the creator of everything. He provides for human well-being by giving us an ability to know Him by our reason, and to do His will by our good will. He gives us our autonomy, by which we are self-sufficient. It is up to us to use our autonomy to live virtuous lives. He promises eternal reward or punishment in an afterlife.⁶

4. The Drama of Grace

Humans are not autonomous. Human reason and modern science are insufficient for understanding human life. Moral reflection is insufficient for prompting people to actually do better. We cannot take authenticity for granted.⁷ But God is in love with us. He gives us the graces of eyes of *faith* to discern better and worse with His eyes, the hearts of *love* that seek to be a "we" with others and with Him, and the hands of *hope* hang on no matter how rough the road. God gives these graces regularly throughout a person's life. God also enters human history, at times by speaking through prophets, at times by providing sacred writings, and, in the Christian view, by taking on flesh to be one with us and founding a community called to continue changing the course of our history for the better.

I present these world dramas as distinct, but many people move from one to another. We may abide in one for years, months, days, even hours. I add "hours" here because even during a given day, we might rely on some superstition (Drama of Fate), then on an assumption that it's up to us to make what we will of our lives (Exclusive Autonomy), then on a self-expectation that we must avoid evil in order to get to heaven (Inclusive Autonomy), and then that God is truly in love with us and

comes personally into our history in the Nazarene and into our hearts as Love (Grace).

Conclusion

We can now give some answer to our two initial questions.

Why do our images of God change?

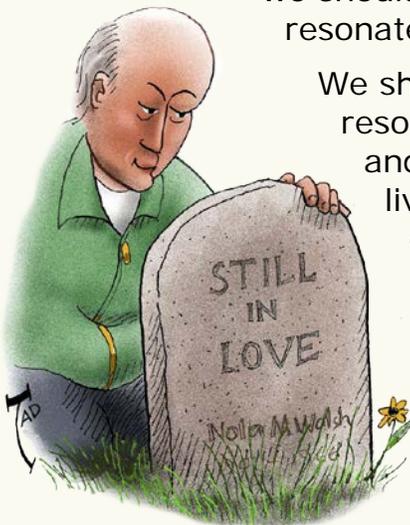
They can change because our mental and affective capacities change as we grow up. They can change because we realize what may be missing in the World Drama that our culture practically forces on us.

What do we need to do about it?

When we feel disenchanted with religion, we should consider that we may simply be disenchanted with our image of God. And if so, we should remain open to more robust images of God that resonate with our own stage of development.

We should test our images of God to see whether they resonate with our sense of the mystery of our personal living and of how some death to self is essential for everyone to live their best. When an image of God lacks this direct effect on our sense of mystery in daily living, it is no surprise to find people who believe, and rightly so, that this God doesn't exist.

A final practical lesson is the importance of a "discernment of story" in which we consider, each day, in what kind of World Drama we imagined ourselves playing our part.



¹ See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Herder & Jerder, 1971), ch. 3, sec. 4. His definition of This excludes from a study of one's "image" of anything all images that do not involve emotions—like the icons on a computer screen or the "H" roadside sign indicating "Hospital." Regarding images of God, this definition considers the stained-glass pictures of religious figures, sculptures of saints, and symbolic representations of "God" in houses of worship only insofar as the actually ignite emotions—which many have long ceased to do.

² Lonergan's definition of "symbols" as "affect-laden images" excludes from a study of symbols all images that do not involve emotions—like the icons on a computer screen or the "H" roadside sign indicating "Hospital." Regarding images of God, this definition considers the stained-glass pictures of religious figures, sculptures of saints, and

symbolic representations of "God" in houses of worship only insofar as the actually ignite emotions—which many have long ceased to do.

³ Morgan Llywelyn, *1916: A Novel of the Irish Rebellion* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates/Forge, 2010), ch. 30 (ebook p. 663).

⁴ My main sources for these insights are Eric Voegelin (*New Science of Politics*, 1952), Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age*, 2007), and Bernard Lonergan (among several other works, "Mission and the Spirit" (1976) in *A Third Collection*).

⁵ What exclusive secularism excludes is everything related to religious belief in God. This phenomenon did not appear in the West until the 1500s. Its causes are mainly (1) the scandal of religious wars and revelations of embezzlement and pedophilia among religious leaders; and (2) the success of reason as demonstrated by modern science.

⁶ In *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005), the authors found that many teens today see God as one person (not three, as in Christianity) who rewards or punishes humans on moral grounds in an afterlife, but does not get engaged in human history. See "Teen Spirit," a review by Tom Beaudoin of Kenda Creasy Dean's *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (*America magazine*, Nov 1, 2010) p. 27.

⁷ Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 156, 159, 160. "the scientific age of innocence has come to an end; human authenticity can no longer be taken for granted." 147. His point is that bias and willfulness are mixed in with the intelligence and good will as the drivers of all human developments. Also among the historians who present certain developments as progress or decline.