

Images of God + Discernment

An Excerpt from *The Discerning Heart* by Wilke Au & Noreen Cannon Au

"Picturing God must precede any speaking about God, for our pictures accompany all our words and they continue long after we fall silent before God. Images--the language of the psyche--are the coin of life; they touch our emotions as well as our thoughts; they reach down into our bodies as well as towards our ideas. They arrive unbidden, startling, after our many years of effort to craft them."

-Ann Belford Ulanov, *Picturing God*

"She would have been a different person, if she had had a different God," lamented a woman about her recently deceased friend who lived a God-fearing, though severely repressed and unhappy, life. How we perceive God dramatically influences how we see ourselves and how we think about life. Consciously or not, our God-images directly affect the way we think, feel, and act. That is why reflecting on our images of God is so important... "If we are ever to reach through our God-images to the God who breaks all our images," states Jungian analyst Ann Ulanov, "then we must begin with our own pictures of God--noticing them, embracing them, housing them"...

...To assert that God is illimitable Mystery is to acknowledge that we cannot understand God because God utterly transcends everything we know in the created world...When we acknowledge the ineffable mystery of God, we become free to examine our God-images carefully and to ask whether they serve us well in our attempt to live vibrant lives of Christian love. If flawed images of God constrict our freedom and dampen our embrace of life, "new images which ground hope and support transcendence can emerge from the imagination once...[we] surrender to the mystery of God. Images at one point are given up only to be reclaimed with the realization of their inadequacy and yet their indispensability for cherishing the experience of the sacred" [Raymond Studzinski, OSB]...

...Our images reflect the influence of our elders, parents, teachers, our cultural and religious traditions...As image-making creatures, we use the stuff of everyday life to create pictures of the ineffable Mystery of God: "Unlike God, we do not create out of nothing but out of what is given us and what we find lying around. Bits of mother and father appear in our God-images. Bits of treasured nature, such as light and darkness, wind and storm, dew and fire, turn up accompanying Yahweh or Christ." What is important is that we see through our God-images to the God beyond them...Sometimes our core image of God contains internal contradictions, as with a college student who wrote the following reflection:

My parents and teachers have painted God out to me as being a happy, loving, welcoming force. I feel like at times I can feel God's forgiveness and love when I do something wrong. My personal images of God are of a larger-than-life faceless figure that has the power to do anything he wants but chooses only to love and cherish us all. My insight is that God loves us all and only wants the best for us, but he is the wrong guy to make mad!

With an image such as this, one would be naturally hesitant and cautious in making choices, not wanting in any way to make God mad! Going beyond the observable influence of parents and teachers who communicate their understanding of God to us, the process by which we form our images of God is a complex one that originates in the infant's unconscious mind,

according to some psychoanalysts...In this way...our images of God and pattern of relating to others are formed in earliest childhood. Thus, to be more aware of negative or problematic God-images that impede the lifelong process of mature growth, we need to consider how our developmental history has shaped those unhelpful images...

...Sometimes the image we verbally profess is not really the image that holds sway. It is not uncommon for our *professed image* (what we consciously believe and say is our image of God) to deviate greatly from our *operative image* (the actual image that influences our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes)...Many of us are unconsciously influenced in our choices by distorted images of God. Sometimes these distorted images are the result of negative *transference*, the psychological process by which we unconsciously bring feelings from a past relationship into another relationship. Transference, for example, explains how people who were raised by overly controlling parents often end up with a distrustful and rebellious attitude toward authority figures and God, who are perceived by them as domineering and oppressive, much like their own parents...

...Distorted images can also arise from the psychological process called *projection*. Projection is a defense mechanism by which people unconsciously disown or deny unwanted feelings, attitudes, and traits by assigning them to others. Projection can...[destroy] the freedom we are all meant to enjoy as children of God. Just as we project unwanted attitudes and emotions onto others, we also project them onto our image of God...The psychological phenomenon of projection...exposes us to the danger of imaging a god with attitudes, feelings, and traits like our own--and with the same blind spots.

Such images are naturally distorted and consequently easily destroy the possibility of mature Christian obedience. For example, when our dominant image of God is that of a merciless tyrant, our corresponding response of obedience can only be servile. When our dominant image is that of resident policeman, then our response can only be fearful. When it is that of a judge, then our obedience can only be guilt-ridden. And when it is that of a demanding parent, obedience tends to be infantile or childish. The connection between our father or parent-image of early childhood and our later conception of God is obvious, especially in those of us who exhibit an abnormal fear of authority or an apprehensive attitude toward God. Destroying the possibility of a free and loving surrender to God's influence, this fear can often be traced to the tyranny of a dominating parent. When it is not recognized as a result of a false image of God and is permitted to dominate our religious consciousness, it undermines Christian obedience, which has nothing to do with being fearful, servile, childish, and guilt-ridden..

...We need images that respect both the dignity of God and of human beings...liberation of God from inhibiting images that arise from projection, transference, and childhood deprivations. These deficient images destroy our ability to live freely as people loved by God. We must abandon the images of a distant and disinterested god, as well as a power-oriented and possessive deity opposed to human desires and development. Instead, we must develop images of God that accentuate the loving generosity of a personal God who not only gifts us with life but is intimately present as a support for the development of that life.

These life-giving images are not new, for they are rooted in the New Testament and reflect the God revealed by Jesus...