

Disposable Images of God

An Excerpt from *How Big Is Your God?* by Paul Coutinho

In the Indian tradition, there are 330 million gods. No one believes that any one of these gods is divine. They are expressions of human experiences of the Divine, images that point to deeper aspects of the Divine. Spiritual growth happens when one is constantly experiencing and transcending these images until one reaches the Divine with no images. Beyond images, beyond manifestations, beyond mediators, one experiences the Divine as divine.

In a similar fashion, the Christian mystics tell us--and I've come to understand through personal experience--that if we want to get deeper into the river of divine life, if we want to know an infinitely big God, then we too will have to transcend the images of God that we might have. The Divine is so great, so wondrous, so unfathomable that any image or metaphor we hang on God is at best only a partial fit and quickly limits our ability to experience other aspects.

So let's reflect for a moment on our lives and ask ourselves, Who is God for me? How have I been experiencing God? Is my God the priestly God, whom I try to please through the rituals and traditions of my faith, the Mass, through prayer, sacrifices, the church, or the temple? Is my God the Yahwistic God, with whom I feel broken, weak, imperfect, sinful, and yet loved? Is my God the Elohist God, for whom I try to make myself perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect? Or is my God the God of Deuteronomy, for whom I focus on observing God's law, doing good deeds, and keeping track of the balance of my account in heaven?

It is important to know that each one of these traditions is a *good* tradition. Each one has produced saints. Sometimes we need priests or the temple as an intercessor to help us connect to the Divine or guide us toward grace. Sometimes we need to experience God in our brokenness, in our weakness--and other times we need to see God as so holy, ultimate, and pure that if only we were to remove our sin, God would elevate us beyond our human condition. And at times, we need to accept that what we do to others we ultimately do to ourselves, that we reap what we sow, because this is God's interconnected universe, and God doesn't play favorites.

Whatever way you relate with God, it is good; it is right. Once you recognize your way of relating with God, find ways of deepening this relationship and of integrating the best of all four traditions. By doing so, you will begin to transcend the traditions and move deeper into the river of divine intimacy. One way to start is by asking, who was the God who was introduced to me as a child? How and when did my God change? Who is God for me now, and what is a deeper expression of my relationship with the Divine?