

3. THINKING THEOLOGICALLY



Focus: While family, education, social class, and geography all contribute to how we think about God, our experiences and perceptions along life's journey also shape our thinking. Being comfortable with ambiguity, metaphor, and uncertainty help us get the Divine "out of the box" and rethink theological ideas that have become barriers to our further spiritual growth.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is an account of a journey of faith. The sojourner, named Celie, discovers new ways of understanding religion and of imaging the Divine. In one of her letters to a friend, Celie writes, "She say, 'My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.'"

To ask the questions of how the divine is intertwined with the world is to think theologically: How do we understand the unfathomable mystery that we've come to call God? Is there a God whose character and ways of relating to the world can be explained in ways that make sense? As Bill Nelson has suggested, even the word "God" itself is a "very slender word that simply covers our shivering ignorance." Exploring these and other questions and concepts are at the heart of thinking theologically – a practice in which we all engage, whether we know it or not.

RE-THINKING SOME LONG-HELD IDEAS

Reading the Bible closely, it becomes clear that there's no *one* way of understanding who God is and how God relates to the world. The Bible is the witness of generations of faithful people recording their own understandings of the divine in their particular time, place, and culture. This theological pluralism reveals changing, developing, and sometimes conflicting ideas about God.

The Bible itself represents a variety of perspectives, each reflecting different understandings of God. The challenge of thinking theologically is about maintaining a creative tension between ideas that generate dialogue, not absolute certainty. At its best, thinking theologically is not about facts, but about wrestling with often abstract ideas and concepts.

Traditional understandings of Christology, Atonement, and the Incarnation are all in flux. In fact, many people find these concepts to be quite irrelevant to contemporary

spirituality. Two of the major ideas that continue to cause conflict among people of faith are the language we use for the Divine and the notion of “omnipotence.”

Many of us get in a rut with our language about or image of God that is narrow and constricting. As our life experience broadens our understanding, some of us become conflicted over whether we can believe at all. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the celebrated preacher at New York’s Riverside Church, was fond of telling of the day a distraught student exclaimed, “I don’t believe in God!” Fosdick replied, “Tell me about this God you don’t believe in; chances are I don’t believe in that God either.” In the 1920s, Fosdick predicted that we would continue to lose generation after generation of the brightest and best young people because they have the impression that they are expected to believe “just so” in order to be a true Christian.

Yet images and ideas used to express the Divine by Christian mystics, theological thinkers, and in scripture are as many and varied as there are experiences of God. The Biblical writers use a rich pallet of metaphors and poetic language to point toward what is ultimately a mystery. The Divine is described as a potter, a cup (of cool water), a path, a safe place, a rock, a burning bush, an eagle, and a whirlwind – all wonderful metaphors that help us assign a variety of attributes to the Divine without being the exclusive last word.

One of the most common images of God is as a father. Listening to many prayers and liturgies, one might think it was the only image of God in scripture. However, God is also imaged as a mother in Deuteronomy 32:18; “You forgot the God who gave you birth,” as “a woman in labor” in Isaiah 42:14, and as a comforting mother in Isaiah 66:13. Is God a mother? Yes. A father? Yes. A rock? Yes. A wind? Yes. Everything we use to refer to God is simply a limited, human effort to explain the unexplainable. To be aware of our language and its implications is a great exercise in thinking theologically – remembering that the language we use to describe the Divine will directly influence how we relate to the Divine.

A SQUARE CIRCLE?

When remembering the old elementary school riddles (If God is all-powerful, can God create a rock too heavy for God to lift? Can God create a square circle?), one is reminded of the ridiculous and shallow levels to which people will reduce arguments about the Divine and think they’re being profound. Just one of the theological concepts that, despite its questionable origins, has had remarkable staying power, is “omnipotence.” It’s not unusual for people to think of Cecil B. DeMille’s Red Sea parting or an otherwise unexplainable recovery from illness as expressions of the “Almighty” power of God. However, Thomas Aquinas actually created the idea of omnipotence in the 13th century. He reckoned that in order for God to “be” God, God must excel all others in power, essentially having *all* the power. The highest conceivable form of power must be the divine power. So, the Biblical “All – mighty” became “omni = all, potent = power.” What exactly *is* the highest conceivable form of power? He wasn’t as clear on this.

However, many people operate with the understanding that the highest conceivable form of power is the power to determine every detail of what happens in the world. But there's the rub: when unexplainable catastrophe strikes, God is left wide open for people to ask: "Why did God do this to me?" or "What mysterious Divine reason is behind this?"

If God has all the power, shouldn't everything be good? What about evil and our deciding to do the lesser good? Does God "underwrite" evil for the sake of letting us have free will? Does God "permit" sin in order for us to be deluded into thinking we have the final decision? To go down that road gets muddy quickly and gets God mixed up with some pretty shady business – up to and including bad things that can't be attributed to human freedom – what insurance companies call "acts of God." What does it say about a Deity who has all the power and still allows horrible diseases, accidents, and natural disasters to occur?

Some might object to questioning anything but the pure and complete "sovereignty of God," but there are lots of other ways to think of God than one who "rules" over everything; the Biblical witness makes it clear that this "royal" model is just one feeble attempt to grasp a concept that is impossible for our minds to comprehend. What *is* clear is that the idea that God is in possession of "all" the power makes of life and all of creation a really bad puppet show.

The Bible offers a multitude of images and ideas about the Divine. On their own, not one of them is right. Taken all together, they testify to the liveliness of theological thinking over the ages and the wisdom of the Biblical compilers in including them all. If all we ever do is ask questions of these images and ideas, then we've gone a long way toward the practice of thinking theologically that will see us through to another level of understanding the Divine Mystery.

The practice of Christianity is rife with a variety of theological problems and concepts that cripple its relevance in the minds of many 21st century people. But one of the most notable characteristics of the Judeo-Christian tradition has been its amazing flexibility in withstanding the changes and adaptations brought to them by cultures they encounter. The Bible itself is witness to the same event or idea being represented in a variety of theological interpretations, each of which was included in the canon of scripture despite obvious differences. Wrestling with those differences has always played a significant role in the history of both Jewish and Christian concepts of the Divine – and can again play a part in rethinking many of the staid theological ideas that have become stagnant and unhelpful in the 21st century.

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

Crossan asks four questions of 21st century Christians: What is the character of your God? What is the content of your faith? What is the function of your church? What is the purpose of your worship? Describe how you might have answered these questions as a child or young person compared to your understanding today.

Cobb discusses Omnipotence as an unbiblical concept that misrepresents the nature of the Divine. Describe the advantages of seeing God as a persuasive, relational power over the unbiblical notion of omnipotent, coercive power.

What are some of the alternatives to using even the word “God” to describe the Divine?

DVD Chapter 3:

Describe Borg’s stages of pre-critical naïveté, critical thinking, and post-critical naïveté.

According to Varghese, what are some of the characteristics of “thinking theologically?”

How does the hope gained from thinking theologically differ from simply thinking optimistically?

SPIRITPRACTICE: LOCATION

Ufford-Chase says, “We’ve got plenty of thinking going on out there and far too little acting.” Describe an action that you might take that has potential for changing your theological thinking.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

Try expanding your “Divine vocabulary” by using alternative names for God. Below are some examples of the multitude of images for the Divine offered in Hebrew and Christian scripture. Take note of how using different imagery alters your understanding or experience of what Marcus Borg calls “the More.”

The Name [HaShem]: (Leviticus 24:16)
Holy One: (Habakkuk 1:12)
The Spirit Of Wisdom And Understanding: (Isaiah 11:2)
Light and Salvation: (Psalm 27:1)
Our Dwelling Place: (Psalm 90:1)
Fortress: (Psalm 91:2)
Refuge and Strength: (Psalm 46:1)
Hiding Place: (Psalm 32:7)
Shield: (Psalm 18:30)
Rock: (Habakkuk 1:12)
Cornerstone: (Psalm 118:22)
My Cup: (Psalm 16:5)

Star: (Numbers 24:17)
Potter: (Isaiah 64:8)
Creator: (Ecclesiastes 12:1)
Shepherd: (Genesis 49:24)
Redeemer: (Psalm 19:14)
Deliverer: (Psalm 144:2)
Power: (Mark 14:62)
A Consuming Fire: (Hebrews 12:29)
Promised Holy Spirit: (Ephesians 1:13)
The Spirit of the Living God: (2 Corinthians 3:3)
The Spirit Of Truth: (John 15:26)
Helper or Comforter: (John 14:26)

Be sure to follow up on this session’s theme with Session 3’s *Living it Out:* “Beyond the Sixth Grade,” distributed by your facilitator.