

# Like Catching Water in a Net: The (Im)possibilities of God-talk

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God is currently a hot topic. Books on best seller lists, such as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*<sup>i</sup> and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great; How Religion Poisons Everything*,<sup>ii</sup> are attracting copious media attention with their rotweiler-style attacks dismissing any God-talk as naïve and dangerous fantasy. Little did I know when I began writing my own book, *Like Catching Water in a Net; Human Attempts to Describe the Divine*, that it would be launched next month by Continuum New York and London into such a highly charged discussion.<sup>iii</sup> Of course, God has been on the agenda for centuries but every so often we get surges of intense interest beyond the religious marketplace, demonstrating that God is not as self-evident as some would have us believe and that God-talk gets more difficult with every decade of evolving thought.

While I have serious questions about the style of argument and conclusions of these books, I agree with some of what they say about the God they attack, an all-powerful Being somewhere beyond the universe controlling everything like a mammoth telephone switchboard operator usually depicted as an over-worked, elderly male. As these writers claim, a Being who changes the laws of the universe at will to aid some and not others no longer fits comfortably with Twenty-First century scientific knowledge. A tribal Divine Warrior annihilating neighbouring clans in order to annex land for a certain few would be brought before a war crimes tribunal today and a God, silent as Lot offers his virgin daughters for gang rape and Jephthah slaughters his only child in payment for military victory, is morally offensive. Variations on this God-imagery continued in Christian theology with the death of Jesus explained as a loving God killing His own Son as a blood sacrifice in order to satisfy Divine offence and wrath, even though the Bible does not spell out this atonement theory as such. Those offended by such critique need to realize that taking the Bible seriously does not mean quoting tired, out of context proof-texts and medieval theology while ignoring or explaining away uncomfortable Divine images.

The difficulty with books like Dawkins' and Hitchens' is their Sunday School description of God and their assumption that, since *this* God is problematic in our contemporary world, atheism is the only intelligent conclusion. I would agree that atheism *is* an intelligent conclusion for the God they attack, but this God-image ignores the plethora of Divine Ideas through religious history and also many current challenges from *within* religious circles to such God-talk. One hundred and fifty years ago, Florence Nightingale would reply to those who asked her why she believed in God, "Which God do you mean?" -- a tribal God to be bribed with favors; a God who kept people loyal through fear; or a God that breaks universal laws to punish some and not others -- which God? <sup>iv</sup> This question can be asked of Dawkins and Hitchens.

Dawkins acknowledges reading Bishop Spong's writings, calling him "a nice example of a liberal bishop whose beliefs are so advanced as to be almost unrecognizable to the majority of those who call themselves Christians." <sup>v</sup> Dawkins also described a public discussion he had with retired Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway, "one of the most stimulating and interesting encounters I have had," <sup>vi</sup> yet he fails to include these men's conclusions in his book, dismissing them as Christian aberrations because their Divine images do not fit the God he is relegating to the dustbin. I found myself therefore short-changed by these books because they fail to take into account the many theologians and religious seekers already on the same critical path but who do not see the only conclusion as no-God-at-all.

I started writing *Like Catching Water in a Net: Human Attempts to Describe the Divine*, not because I received a new Divine revelation or had somehow netted the once-for-all truth, but because I have seen so many people over the years -- friends, students, clergy and church leaders -- trying to make their life experiences fit into distorted theological scenarios and fearsome descriptions of a demanding God to be believed and obeyed, whether it made sense or not. According to traditional theology, we have been born without our permission into a world resembling an obstacle course whose adjudicator is God and the prize heaven. By dint of some genetically predisposed sinfulness, we are all automatically registered in this race located amongst cosmic warfare and supernatural negotiation with the game rules pre-set and little opportunity for input or protest. I wanted to suggest instead, by highlighting many Divine metaphors from

sacred texts across religions and a good dose of, dare I say, reason, that peoples' struggles with doubts and questions may have more to do with their image of God than with themselves. Writing about God was a roller-coaster ride. One morning, I would rush to the computer with a great new image then wander the house all day arguing with myself, "What can *anyone* know about God? Isn't that what I *hate* – people who claim to know who or what God is?" What kept me going is how Japanese artists paint, not by replicating things in realistic detail but by suggestions, sounds and smells hinted at, like a bud not quite formed or a mountain appearing out of the mist under a few skillful brush-strokes. I have written about the Sacred with equal lightness and non-possessiveness, not claiming to make it all add up; to describe it conclusively for all time or ensure all the lines are straight. I have also included voices of those who say God is not-at-all, allowing that possibility to exist alongside many other conclusions across religious thought, without declaring whose truth is true. As Geraldine Doogue said in endorsing my book, I have tried to respect the curiosity of *all* those that search for the sacred in everyday life as vital for our times.

First, a point of explanation. As I say in my book, I use the term "God" simply as a three letter symbol for the Divine Idea across religions, free of any form or theology. Some make this same point by using G\*d or the Divine Idea, but I have capitalized the letters GOD throughout to jolt us into consciousness that this is purely a symbol, not any particular description of That of which we speak.

With that introduction to set myself within current God-talk, what can we say? We cannot talk about believing or not believing in God without some visual or descriptive image in our minds. How we imagine the Divine *matters*, since our God-image determines how we *respond* to it and live our lives in light of It. If God is a stern judge, sizing us up to punish or reward, we live cowering before such scrutiny, constantly fearful we might be found wanting. If God is a powerful ruler, we powerless subjects obey the laws, whether just or arbitrary. If God is the universal Life-Force within the world, we experience this force energizing and inspiring all we do. Our God-images are therefore as much about anthropology as theology -- we live differently, depending on how we image God. The most important thing to take away today is that, since no Divine is visible, anything we say about God is a *metaphor*, a construction of language and

images. Metaphors are word pictures borrowed from within a culture, tradition and worldview to describe something else difficult to describe. They make the best sense *within* that shared cultural experience. “I opened a can of worms,” for example, is metaphorical language which you and I know has nothing to do with actual worms. While God as a sword and shield conjured up feelings of security and protection for ancient tribes, it would make a present-day Iraqi soldier feel ridiculously vulnerable. Not surprisingly, the ancients, powerless before the life-giving and life-destroying natural elements, used them to describe the Divine – mighty wind, consuming fire, thirst-quenching water – but once humans became more confident and in control of their world, *human* metaphors for God moved into vogue. As Greek philosopher Xenophanes said, “*Oxen, lions and horses, if they had hands with which to carve images, would fashion gods according to their own shapes and give them bodies like their own.*”<sup>vii</sup> If we think honestly about it, to call God wise, good and trustworthy actually says more about what *we* value in human beings than what we can prove God to be.

From earliest times, people asked the same questions -- Who are we? Where did we begin? Does something pull our puppet strings and can we manipulate It for our benefit? For the most part, the ancients sensed something greater than themselves, although were respectfully hesitant about describing It. An ancient Hindu Vedic text reads:

... Who knows the truth? ... Only that God who sees in highest heaven ... He only knows, or perhaps he knows not<sup>viii</sup>

When they *did* describe this Something, their language descriptions, whether amorphous force, extra-human spirits, or Divine Beings resembling super humans, came from within their cultural imagination and were limited by that. These descriptions were incorporated into stories of sacred activity, located somewhere in relation to humans. Much ancient cosmology depicted humans sharing space with the Sacred, although separated into a human realm of limits, powerlessness and uncertainty and a sacred realm free of such limits. Hindu Vedic Deities lived and battled in known earthly regions; Sacred Beings of indigenous Australians created the landscape and remained present in their creations; and the Hebrew beginning story placed the Gods and humans in the same Garden -- until the Garden became a *gated*

community and humans took up residence outside, but still in the neighbourhood. Biblical distinctions of seen and unseen, visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly represent this separation within the same space. In Hebrew thought, “heaven” referred to the *physical* dome of the sky, but also the realm of the Divine, not limited to the sky but encompassing everything and everywhere. Only later in Christianity would God and the divine realm be relegated to the sky with God intervening in human affairs from outside the world.

At this mysterious border between these realms, “religion” emerged -- from *religio*, “to bind,” binding the ordinary to the sacred. Religion addressed human questions, the answers differing with location, knowledge and worldview – and it still does since the questions that lit fires in those ancient hearts still burn in our hearts today, despite our technological prowess. When our child goes missing, fear still rolls over us like a suffocating blanket and our first reflex, like our ancestors, is to cry to Something for help, regardless of whether we believe in that Something or if that Something is able to break natural laws. And what does “believing” mean anyway? Some people accept a Something More because it explains those feelings of awe and emotion which seem beyond human capacity to generate; some because they need Something More to define their place in the universe: and some because a Something More is useful, like the genie of the lamp, especially in face of death. For many that claim *not* to believe, it is often because they have not found satisfactory answers, no matter how hard they have searched or keep searching, rather than some systematic rejection of religious claims.

We have no option but metaphorical language with which to speak of the Divine. The *problem* arises when certain culturally limited ancient metaphors in sacred texts and creeds evolve, over time, into literal descriptions of the Divine which some people will go to endless lengths to defend. While early Jewish and Christian theologians stated firmly that the Divine was beyond imagining and attempts to do so were idol-making, there seemed no doubt what God looked like by medieval and renaissance times, given the paintings and frescos that drip from European walls. God was *literally* a heavenly King, Judge and Father, as defined by those roles at that time, and humans were *literally* subjects, sinners and sons bound for a

literal heaven or hell. Many ancient metaphors, whether Israelite or medieval European, are simply not applicable today and desperately need to be retired. Why do we still teach high-tech urban Sunday School children about a Good Shepherd when they have no experiential concept of a wandering loner protecting his livelihood against wild beasts on the unforgiving Palestinian hills? Surely there are more appropriate contemporary metaphors for Divine protection, yet people become indignant today if we substitute non-biblical metaphors. For them, the *metaphor* has become a literal description of God, thus sacred. Some biblical Divine metaphors are downright offensive today, as I have already mentioned, yet we still read Psalms in church, without comment, promising that God will destroy our enemies in rivers of blood, make us prosperous if we do the right thing and protect us from all disasters -- promises we know not to be true in reality.

Furthermore, despite countless Divine metaphors in sacred writings, Christianity has fished from a fairly limited pond. British hymn writer Brian Wren has analyzed the most popular Divine images in the *Methodist and Ecumenical Hymnbook*; *Songs of Praise* television; and the prayers, liturgy and creeds still used in British churches.<sup>ix</sup> Of 290 images, 73% were King-Father-protector images with God a powerful, ruling male. *Because* of this frequency, people in the pews trustingly *assume* that these are the central scriptural images, yet we first meet the Divine as formless Spirit brooding over the waters, life breathed into humanity; voice, cloud, wind, fortress, and spirit -- not a male ruler amongst them. The metaphor "Father" appears only 15 times in the Hebrew Bible, mostly denoting the head of a tribe or used as a revered title, rather than a hands-on parent. Of over 200 New Testament uses, almost half are crowded into John's Gospel, with little emphasis elsewhere. Why? Because the collator of John's Gospel is painting a giant family metaphor to show Jewish followers now outside the synagogue that they are still part of the Father-God's clan. Likewise, "sons of God" was *not* a biological sonship in biblical language, but used for kings (Psalm 2:7); angels (Job 38:7) and all of Israel (Hosea 11:1). By the Fifth Century, however, the Christian Church had basically limited the "Son of God" title to Jesus and reinterpreted the "son-father" metaphor as a literal *biological* relationship, bolstered by an interpretation of Jesus' birth story, found only in two gospels, as from a virginal woman. With this *biological* Father-Son metaphor

cemented in the Trinity, God's literal masculinity was ensured through the Divine impregnation of a woman and "Father" became the dominant God-description, replicated in an all male Church hierarchy of "Papa" (Pope) and "fathers."

In a similar scenario, the metaphor "king" was ascribed to the Divine once the Hebrew people established a Kingdom. In the New Testament, Jesus talks of bringing in the "Kingdom of God" – or that is how it is translated, not surprisingly, in the *King James Version* of the Bible published in the sixteen hundreds to solidify *King James'* position as head of the church. Today, many prefer the translation "reign of God" while others see the more accurate translation, given the era, as "empire of God." Yet so-called *contemporary* choruses sung today in churches in Australia, England and the United States are filled with the far-from-contemporary God-image of "almighty King" and "king of Kings," even though America fought a war to get rid of kings and England and Australia have had a queen for years! If you think gender is not also implied in such titles, try calling God a "Queen." When metaphors become literal descriptions, taking on the characteristics that go along with that description, we have totally limited the Divine possibilities to a God created in our own image.

But how *can* we speak of Something that has made a career of obscurity and silence? Yahweh was always disguised in clouds, thunder or burning bushes; the Hindu Brahman, is encountered only in Its various incarnations; and Islam refuses to depict Allah in any form other than intricate designs combining calligraphy and elements from nature. If God is *not* a Being as we know it, or a Thing as we know it, God is *No-one* or *No-thing* (Nothing). According to Jewish scholar Maimonides, therefore, "*It is better by far to be silent and to be, simply, before God with the intention of your mind, as the Psalm again says: 'Ponder upon your beds, and be silent.'*"<sup>x</sup> This is the mystical path, an intuitive unknowing that God *is*, rather than a cerebral knowing of *what* God is. Mystics either say nothing or say what God is not -- "God is not powerless," "God is not ignorant." Others talk of Darkness or Divine absence, meaning we can never capture the Divine with our camera lens of dogma or butterfly net of Absolute Truth. While this negative theology is useful in that it does not, like king and father, limit God to a particular shape or

cultural expectation, for ordinary people it has no handles on which to hold and there is also a slim line between a God who is *No-Thing* (nothing) and a God who is *Not anything* at all, does not exist. What use is an absent, silent God before whom prayer feels like simply shouting into the wind? While some jump to defend Divine obscurity as acceptable, logical and beneficial, God is, in reality, *not* there for many people, or remains in absentia. At a recent seminar, someone was extolling Luther's idea of the "hidden" God when a Jewish theologian challenged him, "Don't let God off the hook like that! A hidden God says nothing to the Holocaust survivor. If God was hiding there and did nothing, who wants such a God?"

"Does God exist" is not a new question. Until the Middle Ages, God's existence reigned pretty much unchallenged, with confident definitions spelled out in creeds and commentaries. The Enlightenment philosophers challenged such looking into God's cards and limited God-talk to what humans could actually know. Thus the *cosmological* argument became popular. Just as a watch found in a forest would assume a watchmaker because of its intricate design, nature also indicates a *Divine* Watchmaker. It did not take long, however, for someone to point out that Nature does not *uniformly* proclaim a "Designer-above-reproach" since rain brings floods, lions kill their prey and disaster hits the unrighteous *and* the righteous. Probability God-language then surfaced – it is more reasonable to suggest that there is a God than not. After Darwin, the term "atheism" came into use for those who believed God's existence could not be proved or empirically verified and it was later adopted by those who denied any supernatural being or transcendent order at all. It also became a useful derogatory label within Christian circles to apply to anyone who espoused views different from the "correct" or "orthodox" beliefs. Paul Tillich earned the title in the 1950's for rejecting an external Divine Being in favour of a "Ground of Being" within everything, and also for questioning whether the term existence, tied to birth and death, is even applicable to something infinite or immortal. Bishop John Robinson earned the title in the Sixties for rejecting the theistic God, and this conference has not escaped suspicion. A letter to a Uniting Church newspaper this month warned people to be on their guard against Bishop Spong's "so-called Progressive Religion" because "genuine seekers, the marginalized and yes, even some mature Christians who have questions and

doubts, could easily be persuaded that some of the things he says might be true ... and cause many souls to fall and be lost to the kingdom of God.”<sup>xi</sup>

Many of us today are caught between the failure of old images and an unwillingness to let go of what has given meaning and sense to our lives. Our task therefore, as Progressive Christians, is to consider which biblical images, or none, are useful in our Twenty-First century worldview, and whether there are images and language metaphors from contemporary experience that better allow us to talk about the Divine Idea. This will, of course, make no sense to those who believe we can know exactly what God is like because the Bible, and especially Jesus, “tell us so,” but honestly, if you take *all* of Jesus’ sayings about God, we have very slim pickings, especially since modern scholars have reduced what Jesus probably said even further. Even then, much of what is claimed about the Christian God comes not from Jesus’ words but from *Paul’s* metaphors and the doctrines and creeds developed later by Church fathers, structured around a healthy dose of Greek philosophy.

The *Hebrew* God we inherited was actually formless, manifesting Itself in different ways – pillars of cloud, voices, wind. Formlessness *still* allows us to metaphorically picture the Divine – as Life Force pulsing through us, Universal Energy, wild, free Spirit, Matrix of everything. Formlessness can also survive an age of science because of its potential to emerge in new metaphorical forms compatible with contemporary knowledge. The answer “I don’t know” to the question “Who is God?” is therefore not hopeless agnosticism but rather serious acknowledgement of the question’s limits. It always intrigues me how traditional Christianity has highlighted in yellow marker pen the pictorial imagery of John 3: 16 as the definitive description of Divine activity, interpreted as a single parent God offering up His only offspring as a blood sacrifice in the name of love. Yet earlier in the *same* chapter are two *other* pictorial metaphors for the Divine-human encounter – humans being birthed from the Divine womb into new life (v. 3); and being born of a Spirit imaged as the totally free wind infilling the universe (v 8). How selectively we have chosen the metaphors to turn into reality! What if one of these other metaphors had been highlighted in yellow by our forebears as the basis Christian doctrine – brought into life from the

Divine body or transformed by a Spirit infusing the universe as un-harnessed energy -- rather than “washed in the blood of a sacrificial lamb or the slaughter of a Divine Son?”

Tomes have been written about one strange little phrase in the Hebrew story of creation. Even those who describe the creation story as myth or metaphor gleefully scoop up this one phrase to argue all sorts of truths from it. Why? Because we benefit immensely from the line “And God said, “Let us make humankind in our own image, according to our own likeness” (Gen 1: 26). Speculation abounds over how humans resemble the Divine – physical or intellectual likeness, a soul or divinity not possessed by other animals – which is a strange exercise given that we claim not to know what God is like. If we look again at the story, however, we are *told* what is of the Divine in us – the life-giving Divine breath breathed into clay (Genesis 2: 7). While this is a pictorial description, the Divine breath within us and the universe, giving and maintaining life, suggests metaphorical language for today, not as a Being over against the world but Life-sustaining Breath within the world, or alternately, the Universe as God’s body energized by Life-giving Breath. Such imagery brings to mind the Psalmist, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” (Psalm 139: 7)

Richard Dawkins rejects a God “out there” tinkering with natural laws to work miracles and change physical circumstances because, as an evolutionary biologist, he has other explanations for how the universe works. We can no longer bury our heads in the sand and hold on to pre-scientific descriptions of a God still driving the train of the universe from outside, not even on automatic but with a hands-on gear-stick. We have to find God-language that makes sense within scientific knowledge, not over against it or separate from it. This is not to say that science can or must explain everything, but rather that we can no longer describe Divine activity in the world in ways that contradict what can be demonstrated empirically as the working of natural laws. Prior to the Enlightenment, philosophy, science and theology were all described by the Church but after the Enlightenment, philosophy excluded God from its discussions just as science would soon stop including God in its explanations. English mathematician and philosopher Alfred

North Whitehead in the early 1900's saw the problems with such compartmentalization and proposed a system of conceiving the universe that could encompass philosophy, science and theology in one conversation. Whitehead's ideas, called Process Thought, are extremely complex and, while I discuss them in my book, they are not the stuff for today's time-frame. They do provide, however, a pictorial view of the universe into which both scientific knowledge and a God-space fit, albeit a very different God-space from the traditional theistic God. Like contemporary science, Process Thought sees the universe as a vast interconnected organism where everything is constantly changing, from the cellular level up, this changing affecting everything and being affected by everything. A helpful image is a spider's web. When something disrupts one side of a web, the whole web shakes and must stabilize itself to survive, thus what we do and how we choose to act in this universe affects everything. God is not something outside of the world but an integral part of this interconnected, changing, organic universe, affected by changing events as well as affecting them and being changed. God is imaged metaphorically here as Divine Persuasion or Lure, offering to each event in every new moment, alongside the many other influences, an optimal course towards richness in the next moment. These emerging moments are not "predetermined" to accept Divine Persuasion but rather are lured towards this choice for transformation. If they reject the Divine Lure and repeat the past, the Divine aim for the whole interconnected *world* in that moment is affected and limited. Subsequent Divine Persuasion must be formulated within the limited options our choices have created, but always it is the *maximum* possibility given the *limits* of the moment. When emerging moments *accept* the Divine Lure towards transformation, we are in process, becoming more "like God." Such metaphorical imagery is compatible with contemporary science because science has also identified elements of unpredictability and chance within the workings of the universe. While science names these windows of chance or choice by its own metaphors, it is our option, as a faith statement, to call this "Divine Persuasion," thus including a Divine space in our worldview. This is not the old theistic God of different stuff, external to the world and unaffected by it, but a metaphorical Divine Urging – call it conscience, heart, ground of being, Love – working within us and the world towards richness and wholeness. Such God-talk is panentheism – the Divine within the world (immanent) but not limited to or by the world (transcendent).

Changing the metaphors sheds new light on old questions, for example “why do bad things happen to good people.” Rather than God orchestrating all events of life from without and thus seeming to cause or allow bad things to happen to good people, Divine Persuasion within the world (or, in a biblical metaphor, Spirit) leaves the choices to us to shape our world for better or worse. When a drunk driver kills our child, he has refused to heed Divine Persuasion towards a life-enriching world and, since this Persuasion is an integral element of this ever-becoming world, It is *also* affected by this tragedy, suffering like us. When William Sloan Coffin faced his congregation at Riverside Church, New York, after his young son died in a self-inflicted car accident, he did not preach about the Divine will or why it happened. He simply claimed consolation in knowing that, as the waves closed over his son’s car, the Divine heart was the first to break. A metaphorical Divine Aim working constantly within the world towards mending and re-creating the planet also changes ecology to eco-theology, painting new images of our universe as the Divine body, a metaphor our primal ancestors understood. Australian Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo (also known as Kath Walker) once asked her father how they got on without God before white people came. “Because we had the Earth Mother to protect us,” he replied. When she asked why the Earth Mother was not called God, her father replied, “Because there are no Gods. God is in the mind. Can you see God?” “No,” said Oodgeroo. “Can you see the Earth Mother?” “Yes,” she replied. “Question answered,” her father said.<sup>xii</sup> We have shied away from such God-imagery in the past because, not only does it demote humans from the centre of the universe, but the Earth as the Divine body also smelt of the Goddess worship Judaism and Christianity tried hard to bury. Yet the metaphor of the universe as the Divine body nurturing all life within it brings to mind Paul’s words to the Athenians about God “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17: 28). As I said at the beginning, re-examining our Divine metaphors is not just an academic exercise because the way we *imagine* the Divine determines the way we relate to or live with that Divine and also whether we can believe in a God at all. There is a huge difference between an external Judge notching up when we are naughty or nice and Divine Persuasion urging and energizing us within the universe.

This is just a smattering from my book *Like Catching Water in a Net*, which also discusses the claim that changed God-talk forever, both within Christianity and beyond – the claim that the Jewish sage Jesus *was* God. This claim demands close scrutiny today with the discovery of new gospels and the careful work of biblical scholars in the Jesus Seminar and elsewhere. Since this claim evolved by theological construction from biblical texts over the first centuries of Christianity, any critique also involves an investigation of the nature of the biblical texts themselves and their application and authority in our very different worldview. I believe the *greatest* need in church communities today is some serious thinking about how we read and use the Bible. Community-splitting debates about homosexuality are not so much about homosexuality but about what the Bible says, or does not say, about it. Debates about teaching intelligent design along with evolution in schools are not about science but about what the *Bible* says or does not say about creation. Few have read the Bible through and fewer know how its contents have varied over time, yet we make amazing claims for this book. With any other book of such magnitude, we would ask searching questions about its authors, origins and editing through history, but this has been discouraged with the Bible. It has become, for many, a magical talisman to wave aloft or carry underarm as a sign of faith. When opponents of Progressive Christianity tell us to “Go back to the Bible,” my answer is, “I do, and there I find both the noblest of actions and the worst examples of Divinely sanctioned violence.” Taking the Bible seriously means *confronting* its outdated and culturally limited laws used against people today, whether women, gays, or people from different belief systems.

We also need to challenge the claim of inspiration that has deflected biblical criticism for years. How can anyone argue biblical infallibility on the Divine inspiration of the writers when we don’t even know who they were? How can we say God will not let scripture lead us astray when the Bible has spawned *hundreds* of different, often harmful denominations and cults, all claiming “one and only truth” from the same text? If we go to the Bible itself, we find only one verse describing scripture as “inspired” - Timothy is told to hold fast what he has learned because “all scripture is inspired by God and *useful* for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (11 Timothy 3: 16). The scriptures in question were Hebrew scrolls, not today’s Bible. “Inspired by God” is not defined and no claims are

made beyond scripture's usefulness as a guide to life. On the other hand, "inspired" or "God-breathed" is applied often in the Bible to *human beings* – the Spirit metaphorically breathing into clay and coming upon people, including Jesus, to anoint them for a task; Jesus breathing the Spirit into his followers (John 16: 13) and the Spirit coming on all at Pentecost. This recurring metaphor suggests that all humanity is "inspired" or contains the Divine Breath, not just an unknown few who compiled the Biblical writings. The Bible also says that this Spirit still works in *us*, bringing more light and truth to each generation so we can write *our* stories of divine encounters. This takes nothing from the Bible but respects its emphasis on the *Spirit* always working and persuading within the universe.

Certain images of God are so firmly cemented into Christianity's creeds, doctrinal statements, liturgies and hymns however, that it sometimes seems an impossible task to make any permanent cracks in the concrete. Yet, if we call ourselves Progressives, we have to make progress. I remember a wise church leader once telling a much younger me, frustrated by a Synod decision, that success is not necessarily moving the bead to the end of the abacus wire but rather moving the bead *at all!* When I wrote my book *In Defense of Doubt* in the mid nineties, suggesting that doubt was healthy in religion, it was with fear and trembling that I would be, at best prayed over and at worst, excommunicated. I was overwhelmed by a flood of letters from people, including many clergy, telling of guilt they had carried for years because of their doubts and the liberation of finding someone else with doubts confidently speaking out about them. Yet today, doubting the doctrinal status quo is normal and necessary in gatherings like this. Similarly, when Progressive Christians began gathering together outside official church auspices, we knew we were rebelling against the traditions. Bishop Spong's term "Church Alumni" pretty much described how many felt, not wanting to abandon places that had meaning for them but recognizing that they were on the outside, alumni no longer occupying the dormitories and classrooms of their alter mater. Having stepped out the door, however, many have found no balcony on which to stand, let alone another room, and so we are not only alumni, but homeless!

Another letter to a Uniting Church newspaper about this conference claimed that “Spong’s views on religion are so divergent from traditional Christian belief and practice that it is impossible to even classify them as Christian.”<sup>xiii</sup> By whose classification, I ask? And whose job is it to name who or what is Christian? I believe the next progression for Progressive Christians is both a psychological *and* physical move from the margins of theological discourse to its central halls of influence. As someone familiar with the history of Feminist theology, I see so many parallels with Progressive Christianity. A defining moment for Feminist theology, after a path of disenchantment, protest, marginalization and even exclusion from traditional Christianity, was the moment when a critical number of women theologians were finally in the places of power where the “classifying” was being done, and they could no longer be ignored or dismissed but instead, had a defining voice. No longer did they have to defend their right to exist *within* the institution that was their birthright, their home by baptism.

I realize that, for many, the traditional church is beyond reform and has no special “sacredness” over and above small communities being created, independent of the church, to pursue progressive thought. I also know that we all have a use-by date as to how long we can beat our heads against walls. This was also the situation for many early Feminist theologians who saw church systems so totally infused with anti-women sentiment backed by so-called *biblical* doctrines that there was nothing to redeem. Yet some, like American Catholic scholars Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether chose to stay, like irritating pieces of sand in an oyster shell, refusing to leave the naming of God’s truth to those who would name it against women. Schüssler Fiorenza says:

Whether we decide to move into another religious denomination or choose not to belong to any religious institution at all, we can never surrender our claim to spiritual authority. Thus Christian feminists (read progressives here) may not give up their religious authority to define biblical religion and the Christian church. We must never abandon our religious power to articulate a feminist (read progressive) religious vision of justice and liberation ...a power that for centuries has been stolen from us and today is threatened again in various ways.<sup>xiv</sup>

The power of naming was stolen from women over the centuries through loss of memory as women's various protests and visions were unrecorded, marginalized or silenced, thus excluded from history such that any future dissenting voices simply assumed they were alone. This has parallels in Progressive Christianity. Theological challenges such as ours have been made repeatedly throughout church history – by the Enlightenment, 19<sup>th</sup> century biblical scholars and church leaders from England's Broad Church movement; by Rev. Charles Strong in late Nineteenth Century Victoria; by Rudolf Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich during two World Wars; Bishop John Robinson in the Sixties, together with people like Mary Daley, Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering and those associated with the Jesus Seminar, and now this conference, to name a few. Through heresy trials, defrocking, ex-communication, vilification and personal attack, these voices, despite influencing theology in their time, have failed to be threaded together, like beads on an enduring string, as a continuous, legitimate theological expression, but rather have been separated out as various diversions from the mainstream. Just as Bishop Robinson captured public imagination in the Sixties with his book *Honest to God*, this conference proves that progressive Christianity is capturing the imagination of Australians and New Zealanders, disenchanted with the alternatives of traditional theism and no-God-at-all. Yet *we* could become another unjoined dot or a single bead without a string unless we move psychologically and physically from being suspect Christians on theological margins to a strong, confident proclamation *within* places of influence, not apologizing for challenging outdated doctrines and belief statements and not deflected by infallible creeds and denominational confessions waved in our faces. Reformations are not about tweaking a few creedal phrases or medieval metaphors so they can be interpreted in a different way without changing the basic formulae, but about going to the very core of our doctrines to see if they are leaking like sieves. We are the inheritors of a long, honored tradition of spiritual seekers whose roots lie in the teachings of another spirit-intoxicated rebel, one Jesus of Nazareth, who also refused to be silenced by those claiming exclusive authority to describe the Divine. To borrow a metaphor from his example, who are the money changers in today's temples whose tables need to be upturned in order that new God-talk can find a *legitimate* place in Christianity today, not just a space on the margins? And who are the people with both the courage and influence to band together to turn those tables?

In the end, talking about GOD and choosing Divine metaphors are faith statements and different people come up with different answers, or none, from the same material. Sufi mystic Rumi seemed confident that, with the right effort, the Divine *could* be encountered and, “as a person grows in holiness, night turns into day.”<sup>xv</sup> Yet night does not turn to day for everyone, or night might turn to day occasionally, then reverts back to night with despairing regularity for extended periods. The search for GOD is ongoing, even for those who have decided that GOD is not-at-all, because even that conclusion in an evolving world is necessarily open to contradiction, just as certainty about a Divine Presence is open to evolutionary disillusionment. Past seekers, whether Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim or indigenous Australians, have thrown back over their shoulders hints and visions, but always dressed in metaphors from another place that will need careful unpacking if they are to guide us on our path. In my experience, and what I hear from others, the quest is more about the journey and the questions than about “once I was blind but now I see” conclusions. As Emily Dickinson said, “We both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble.”<sup>xvi</sup> The question is, can you live with that ... can I live with that? I can, because I can do no other. It’s how I live with everything else, a continual juggling of a few certain facts, constant new experiences, diverse opinions, and faith in many things some scientifically verifiable and others not -- it is the adventure of being alive. I take comfort in Frederick Buechner’s words:

*Theology is the study of God and his ways. For all we know, dung beetles may study humans and their ways and call it humanology. If so, we would probably be more touched and amused than irritated. One hopes that God feels likewise.*<sup>xvii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006).

<sup>ii</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Crows Nest, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> Val Webb, *Like Catching Water in a Net: Human Attempts to Describe the Divine* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in Val Webb, *Florence Nightingale: The Making of a Radical Theologian* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), 209.

<sup>v</sup> Dawkins, 237.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid

<sup>vii</sup> Quoted in John Bowker, *God: a Brief History* (London: DK Publishing, 2002), 15.

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- <sup>viii</sup> *Rig Veda*, quoted in Juan Mascaró, trans. *The Upanishads* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971), 10.
- <sup>ix</sup> Brian Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow: Godtalk in Worship; a Male Response to Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroads, 1989).
- <sup>x</sup> Quoted in Bowker, 220
- <sup>xi</sup> *Journey*, August 2007, 19 (magazine of the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia).
- <sup>xii</sup> Quoted in Amantha Trenoweth, *The Future of God: Personal Adventures in Spirituality with Thirteen of Today's Eminent Thinkers* (Newtown, NSW: Millennium Books, 1995), 70.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Journey*, 19.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ecclesiology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroads, 1993) 3.
- <sup>xv</sup> Quoted in Robert Van de Weyer, ed., *Rumi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998), 36.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Quoted in Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 37.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (London: Collins, 1973), 91.