



# Goodness: A Doctrine of God

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# Goodness

## A Doctrine of God

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*For Rennie and Tom*

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# Introduction

*Seek not afar beauty*

*Lo, it glows in dew-wet grasses all about thy feet*

*In birds, in sunshine, childish faces sweet*

*In stars and mountain summits topped with snows*

*Go not abroad for happiness*

*Behold it is a flower blooming at your door*

*Bring love and laughter home*

*And evermore joy shall be yours as changing years unfold*

*In wonder-workings or some bush aflame*

*We look for truth and fancy it concealed*

*But in earth's common things Love stands revealed*

*While grass and flowers and stars spell out God's name*

Hymn 77, Seek Not Afar For Beauty, Minot Judson Savage<sup>1</sup>

This text attempts to describe a constructive theological vision of God and the world. It is not, though, a work of apologetics. My intention is not to convince you of an exclusive truth, nor is it to walk you towards any specific tradition or perspective. From what I have witnessed,

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<sup>1</sup> Unitarian Universalist Association. 1993. *Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: Beacon Press: Unitarian Universalist Association. 77.

the journey of reflection, discovery, and faith can be an intensely lonely one for all of us—no matter how well we fit or do not fit within the confines of tradition and intentional community.

But it does not have to be. Unlike with physical illness or injury, there is no specialist available that can unilaterally take charge and heal our wounds of spiritual confusion and anger. Instead, chaplains, ministers, and fellow congregants can serve, witness, and be present with, but should not seek to provide pat answers or clichés that gloss over the complex web of emotions and experiences that each and every person must at some time grapple with. This presence, in the form of someone who listens without prejudice, or who can help by asking questions and engaging with curiosity and genuine interest, can be vital in catalyzing a theological wrestling that is generative and life-giving. A community of two. A community that can make all the difference in a dire moment.

That is what I hope to be able to accomplish here. In working my way towards what God is for me, I am asking you to be engaged alongside in a mutual process of discovery. Distanced though we are through these pages and in time, it is my hope and prayer that we can minister to each other. As I put forward a constructive theological vision with questions, answers, reflections, and assertions, it is my hope that you will work alongside me considering my claims. That you will weigh them against your experience and your perspective. We aren't working towards fundamental, unbreakable, foundational capital-T Truths about God and the universe. Theology doesn't need to be unshakably "correct". All it needs to do is at least try to leave the world better than it found it. And it needs to be honest and beholden to one's own truth.

The small trickle of mountain water from which we will attempt to trace a growing river is this: all of us deserve goodness. All of us are worthy of experiencing goodness, and all of us are capable of providing it to others in the best ways we can. It is my impression that we come

into the world knowing this implicitly. It is over the course of a complicated life—and no life is uncomplicated—that the waters are muddied, and this truth slips away into turbid currents. But it is with this truth—so simple it feels silly to even say it—that I want us both to return as we start our work together. You and I and everyone is worthy of experiencing and sharing goodness.

Starting from this point, I want us both to work. I want us to work together and individually over the course of this text as we both struggle together to determine meaning, truth, and perspective. I will work with my imagined version of you—grappling with what I imagine you will find persuasive, unpersuasive, interesting, or downright absurd as I develop a constructive theological vision. In return, I hope you will engage with me critically as you work to determine what rings true, or false, for you. As you read and respond with thoughtfulness, anger, dismissal, happiness, boredom, excitement, or whatever else it is that bubbles up for you during our time together, it is my hope that you will come away, just as I have, with a new angle on God and a greater understanding of what matters. Even if—perhaps especially if—we end our time together with diametrically opposed views.

Your relationship with the divine—how you understand it, feel it, doubt it, question it, wrestle with it, and more—is a powerful gift not only to you but to everyone who is blessed to know you. And so, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for walking with me and taking this time to do the sacred work of reflection. In these pages, it is my hope that together we will work to get closer to that which is holy, and perhaps even learn how to share that connection with the world.

Each of us knows grief and knows it intimately. The same is true for joy, hope, anger, doubt, and fear. These are the bones of faith, and it is upon them that we begin to build.

# **Section I**

## **God**

# Archery, Anger, and Faith

The route to the archery range was much longer than the other paths. The dirt road wound from the center of the summer camp, right outside the big dining cabin, through a shady wood beside the lake. My best friend, Aaron, and I signed up for archery each summer at sleepaway camp in the years from when we were 10 to 13. Not for an intense love for the sport, but because both of us were possessed with an almost preternatural level of laziness. This laziness meant that on the big day when campers arrived to sign up for their activities, Aaron and I would invariably opt to sleep in and saunter down to the sign-up sheets well after the popular selections had filled up. Archery, situated in a dusty far-off corner of the camp and helmed by a rotating cast of impressively bored teenage camp counselors, always had spots left for us.

The fact that I genuinely loved going to the archery range to shoot arrows day in and day out was a happy coincidence. Aaron found the whole endeavor terribly boring. But, as was his way, he always managed to find the means to make mischief and thusly make life more fun for himself—as well as slightly more harrowing for the teenage staffers tasked with keeping him alive. While Aaron’s antics were what kept him happy, I remember the act of practicing archery on that unkempt range fondly. I remember the cheap wooden arrows, often bent and sometimes missing a vane or two of fletching. I remember the steadiness of my breath (when I remembered not to hold it) as I would nock an arrow. I can remember the feeling of drawing the bowstring back with my skinny, shaking arms, pausing, and then loosening on the exhale before hearing that ever so satisfying \*thunk\* as the arrow found its home in the battered, straw-filled target.

I would make games for myself, pretending that I was a hunter protecting a village from monsters. I gave myself little challenges. “I need to get all three of these arrows in the seven

ring or better, otherwise the rampaging dragon will eat me and my family.” More often than not, my imaginary family survived the monstrous onslaught. I much preferred winning over losing, and I was the one making the rules after all.

When I wasn’t lost in my own internal world of bows and arrows and monsters, I was drawn into bantering with Aaron as were the rest of the kids there (and, more often than not, the counselor as well.) Charming and extroverted to the point of making it into an art form, Aaron can hold court like no one I’ve ever met. I can no longer recall the content of the vast majority of our adolescent bickering, tittering, and joking, but one conversation we had back when I was 10 or 11 years old has stuck with me like an arrow burying itself deeply into an old target.

Aaron and I grew up in similar families. Left leaning, white, upper middle-class, privileged, able to attend sleepaway camp three summers in a row. But there were differences that we occasionally discovered in our world views that led to no end of puzzlement between us. And we tended to pick at these discrepancies like scabs. Perhaps the most major rift was that Aaron was Jewish whereas I was raised as an atheist from birth.<sup>2</sup> Compounding the tension, I held a smugness about my detachment from religious institutions that routinely irritated Aaron, who was not particularly religious but found himself pigeonholed into defending faith and belief writ large during our discussions.

It was one of these debates (though I use the term very loosely) that had engrossed us one particularly sweltering afternoon at the unshaded archery range. Almost certainly fed up with my narrow perspective and superior airs regarding my inherited and avowed disbelief in God (or gods of any flavor) Aaron listened as I explained how lucky I felt that I didn’t have to give up my

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<sup>2</sup> My extended family is composed of Protestant and Catholic Christians. My upbringing was culturally Christian, and growing up I celebrated secularized versions of Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter.

precious weekend mornings as he did to attend silly religious services. “Well,” he told me, “Either you’re right and you get some extra Sundays, or you’re wrong and you’re screwed for eternity.”<sup>3</sup>

As a 10-year-old, that shut me right up. I had nothing to say to that. Smiling, Aaron knew that he had won the day, and, after some heavy quietness, the conversation moved to less contentious pastures.<sup>4</sup> But in my silence I didn’t feel like I had been proven wrong—not at all. Instead, I was *angry*. I was absolutely fuming. Aaron’s logic was seemingly completely sound, but he *had* to be *wrong*. I felt it in my bones. I was positively vibrating with frustration and self-righteous indignation over the fact that I had nothing to come back to him with that would show him just how wrong he was.

As an adult, I am now familiar with the argument that Aaron brought to me on that sunny summer’s day. Pascal’s Wager, as it is often called, was put forward most famously by the 17<sup>th</sup> century French mathematician for whom the argument is named. The wager is an admixture of the kind of pragmatic-but-blunt theological argument that Aaron employed it as, in addition to being a mathematical formula that explores the situation of a gamble with life-and-death stakes.<sup>5</sup> As a 10 year old, I wasn’t equipped to rebut Aaron with one of the numerous well-circulated counterpoints to the wager (why are we assuming only two outcomes—why is your God the

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<sup>3</sup> I do not know what Aaron’s theology around salvation and damnation was. When he brought up the concept, my mind went to generally Christian modes of understanding. Being Jewish, Aaron’s perception may have differed greatly from my own assumptions.

<sup>4</sup> During that same conversation, I remember that Aaron remarked something along the lines of, “wouldn’t it be funny if when we grow up you become religious, and I stop?” As it turns out, it was prophecy that came true in both directions. Aaron was a deeply perceptive child, and perhaps even then saw contours of how our lives would be shaped in the years to come.

<sup>5</sup> Hájek, Alan, “Pascal’s Wager”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2022 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/pascal-wager>.

correct one out of all the Gods ever worshipped? Is faith developed through coercion truly enough for salvation? What if there are different expectations depending on one's upbringing and exposure to "the truth"? Etc. etc.)

What immediately grabbed me by my gut and refused to let go, though, was this idea of a God who was prepared to damn me, and excuse Aaron based on essentially making a successful bid in a coin-flip determined by the circumstances of birth regarding whether we were to attend religious gatherings. My reaction to the idea of an arbitrary God who determines eternal fates based on weekend service attendance records is far from unique. I imagine that you are familiar with this specific strain of antipathy yourself either personally or by having experienced another's aversion. But as a child, this moment on the archery range was the first time I truly sat with the prospect of damnation. And I was livid.

That visceral anger I felt welling up impotently inside my tiny frame was the first indication to me that I did indeed have faith of some kind—a belief nestled in me that ignited in this unexpected moment. This moment tested me in ways I neither anticipated nor prepared for. I held my perceived faithlessness as a key tenet of my personhood, after all. James Luther Adams, a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian parish minister and theologian, addresses this identity and idea I prized as a child. In his work *A Faith for the Free*, he insisted that “the differences between people do not lie in the fact that some have faith and others do not. *They lie only in a difference of faith.*”<sup>6</sup> As such, he concludes, “The fact that every man and woman, whether they

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<sup>6</sup> Adams, James Luther, and George K. Beach. 1998. *The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses*. Boston: Skinner House Books. 24. Emphasis original.

will it or not, must put trust in something, is no basis for any particular faith. Rather, the necessity as well as the fact shows only that we humans must choose.”<sup>7</sup>

For Adams, inherited faith, non-critical faith, and faith untested by rational and emotional rigor is naught but a broken clock—if it does align with truth, it is only by coincidence. Faith, examined or not, was not lacking in power in Adams’ day, nor is it in ours. Our faith is what drives us, and it may have very little bearing on our professed religion or lack thereof:

*We must not believe every "pious" man's religion to be what he says it is. He may go to church regularly, he may profess some denominational affiliation, he may repeat his creed regularly, but he may actually give his deepest loyalty to something quite different from these things and from what they represent. Find out what that is and you have found his religion. You will have found his god. It will be the thing he gets most excited about, the thing that most deeply concerns him. But speak against it in the pulpit or in the Pullman car, and he may forget what he calls his religion or his god and rush "religiously" to the defense of what really concerns him. What moves him now is more important than his creed or his atheism; it gives meaning and direction to his life, to his struggles, and even to his foibles.*<sup>8</sup>

In that short theological sparring match between two children on the archery range, I had inadvertently been thrust into contending with my own unexamined faith. A faith that was much more alive and urgent than I would have ever given it credit for. Of course, as a 10-year-old I did not have the resources available to me to move into examining that raw, newly unearthed

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 26-27.

faith—vulnerable as an exposed nerve or a freshly dug up vegetable. But today, two decades later, I can return to that moment as a fragment of time where my truth and my faith, subconscious and essential, were starkly revealed to me.

What was it about Aaron’s challenge that caused me, in Adams’ words, to “religiously” go on the defensive? The concept of God was laughable to me—my conscious mind associated the term with a very specific notion of an embodied immortal organism that looks like an angry Santa Claus, lives in the sky, and wields magical powers of creation and destruction. But it wasn’t Aaron’s suggestion that God might exist that provoked me. What I could not shake was the suggestion that a being so capricious as to doom me—a ten-year-old—to an eternity of flames for the sin of not having converted away from the beliefs with which I was raised was somehow *worthy* of the moniker “God.” Worthy of obedience, fear, and worship. It turned out that my subconscious association with God was more complicated than the easily dismissible man-in-the-sky version I was more than happy to distance myself from.

Prior to this moment, I would not have realized the extent to which I cared about whom or what was referred to as “God.” But, as it turns out, I did care, and I cared deeply. The idea that someone or something who would dismiss me and people like me as unwanted and unworthy so readily could be accepted by another as God made me furious and sad. But this discovery also provided for me a new possibility—a pathway to God. If I cannot accept a damning and arbitrary being—no matter how powerful—as God, then is there someone or something else that can fit there?

For me, then, the question of God begins with the proposition that to be God, God must be worthy of the name. We must accept God as God, and anything that falls short of deserving total love, obedience, and worship is naught but an imposter or pretender—it cannot truly be

God. God, by its very nature, is That Which is Most Important. That Which is the Highest Concern. God, as the ultimate object of faith, must be so. If anything is more important or concerning than God, then we simply got the names mixed up—that second thing might be God, but the first one definitionally cannot be.

Above all, God must be worthy of the title. This is more crucial than God being one entity rather than several; more important than God's physical nature aligning with sacred descriptions; more important than God having a clear set of universal attributes or associated rules to guide our lives by. And, critically, God's worthiness is far more important to me than questions about God's physical or literal existence, which generally are the form that questions regarding faith and belief take on in our day and age.

So where to go from here? Even if we agree that there might be a God, or a possibility or a concept of God, worthy of the name, what form does that worthiness take? Why ought I think that I, or you, or anyone have any right to determine what defines that worthiness? Perhaps there is no universal answer to this quandary. Perhaps there is no God that satisfies the perspective of all people. Perhaps we must settle instead for a preponderance of Gods; Gods that differ from person to person such that another's God might be completely alien or hateful to me.

It may be so. And yet, even though we can only approach God at a slant, in my moments of sharp anger, deep frustration, and incandescent hope, I can see contours of something certain.

# Good God

God is good.

We have heard this sentiment uttered time and time again, so often that it becomes essentially meaningless. The simplicity of this statement, however, belies its importance.

God is and has been said to be the God of many, many things. God of Love, Justice, Peace, Life, Liberation—even Wrath and Judgment. These adjectives seem far more fruitful than merely stating that God is nebulously “good”, and yet goodness is what links all these elements together. Even wrath and judgment, when applied to God, are taken to imply a righteous correction of evil actions and events.

Much ink has been spilled about God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. As the embodiment of Ultimacy, these attributes place power, knowledge, and accessibility at the top of the hierarchy of all things. But what about simple goodness? What happens if we place that simple, uneventful thing at the very core of that which is the Absolute—the Alpha and Omega. What if we understood the phrase “God is Good” not as an application of a characteristic to God, but as a complete and unequivocal equivalence? God is not merely good—God is Goodness itself.

“Goodness”, when compared against love, liberation, or peace is abstract. Wishy-washy. Unhelpful. And why? Because “Goodness” as an abstraction does not exist in our universe—when goodness appears it does so in an augmented form. Goodness exists as love and as comfort when we spend a quiet evening by the fire with our family. Goodness exists as justice and equity when a racist monument is consigned to the scrap heap after a hard-fought legal battle.

Goodness exists as simple creature pleasure when a deer eats lush grass, or when I step outside and see beauty in the dew that covers that grass.

Goodness cannot be excised from this world. It is always all around us. And yet, goodness does not exist as such. It is not something the physical universe contains or provides. Goodness is simply positive meaning. But when it is witnessed within the bounds of our inherently chaotic universe, it is necessarily refracted. Goodness is only perceivable as something more specific—beauty, comfort, love, etc. Goodness is too simple to *be* in a complex world. Here, goodness loses its universality, and thus it loses also its clarity and comprehensibility. An event that I experience as good (eating a cheeseburger) is not a universal good—a vegan or a cow might experience that same event with horror and revulsion seeing it not as a moment of quiet goodness but a moment certifying the chaotic and senseless nature of our world which promotes the consumption of one life for the preservation of another.

Our primary experience of goodness is in the form of value. Valuation is the qualitative and/or quantitative experiencing of something that is good, and valuation occurs only when an event or object is experienced by a subject capable of perceiving and tabulating that goodness. A flowing stream is not valued as good until a deer, rabbit, or human sees it, drinks from it, or even just reads about it and considers it.<sup>9</sup>

But a lack of valuation does not imply a lack of goodness. Instead, I understand goodness as being present in all things at all times. An unwitnessed stream, though perhaps not being valued and experienced in the moment, still is in infinite, interwoven relationships through

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<sup>9</sup> I admit, though, that I am operating on a base of assumptions here about perception and cognition in non-human and abiotic entities. Perhaps a stream is, in fact, perfectly capable of experiencing and valuing itself and other things as good.

space and time. In terms of space, the stream exists in a deep web of relationships to its surroundings in the form of the ecosystem—the stream provides movement of water and nutrients which connects the stream to a vast network of biotic and abiotic entities that rely on it unawares. In terms of time, there exists the eternal possibility that this stream may be found by an animal and experienced as a refuge, and that bubbling, ever-present possibility of goodness is in and of itself a goodness. Finally, the stream is in a relationship of meaning and identity with all moving bodies of water and all peaceful, quiet corners of our world. The valuation attributed to the concept of quiet retreat by any subject currently indulging in any moving water imbues our unexperienced stream with goodness through a chain of meaning-relationships.<sup>10</sup>

The question of what, exactly, is goodness and how do we access and magnify it in our world has been handled eruditely by the naturalist philosopher and theologian Henry Nelson Wieman in his book *The Source of Human Good*. In the introduction to this book, Wieman likens grappling with the concept of value as like unto trying to grab ahold of a cat. One can technically grab the cat in many ways, but it is much more effective to grab ahold by the nape of its neck, for instance, than by trying to do so by a hind leg, tail, or whisker.<sup>11</sup>

The nape of the cat, so to speak, for Wieman is understanding value as being experienced in relationship. Value does not come into being as an innate quality affixed to a single object, but instead it appears in that rich, beautiful space between two objects that bind them together in meaningful relationship.<sup>12</sup> Wieman adopts this perspective on value while asserting that other angles of approach are less effective. Namely, Wieman explicitly discards tactics of identifying

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<sup>10</sup> In this final concept, the stream becomes one *body* in which the *spirits* of calm places/moving waters/etc. are anchored. The final chapter of this work, *The Soul of Goodness*, explores these terms in greater detail.

<sup>11</sup> Wieman, Henry Nelson. 1946. *The Source of Human Good*. Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press. 3-6

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 5-6.

value as a quality within objects, as well as transcendental perspectives that place value in God or elsewhere outside the realm of this universe.

In defining his own Naturalist perspective, Wieman eschews any transcendental or otherworldly perspective of goodness by reasoning that since transcendental realities definitionally do not exist within the universe, “no transcendental reality could ever *do* anything... nothing can happen if it does not happen. But when the transcendental becomes an event, it is no longer transcendental.”<sup>13</sup> Wieman’s intention in trying to dissect and analyze the concept of value is to determine a kind of goodness that might act as a lodestar, allowing for ethical determinations regarding actions that might aid in the maximization of human goodness to be made with greater ease.<sup>14</sup> In this endeavor, Wieman concludes that transcendental positions serve only to confuse and obfuscate a practical mission.

Wieman presents to us the category of “the absolute good”, which is a goodness that exists in the physical world (i.e. is not transcendental) and in his words, “is not relative to time or place or place or person or race or class or need or hope or desire.”<sup>15</sup> More simply, it is a good that is unalterably good. Wieman posits that this kind of absolute goodness can and does, in fact, exist in our universe in what he calls “creative good”, which stands in opposition to “created good.”

Creative good, for Wieman, is absolutely good because it is wholly separate from human desire (unlike created goods which are intended to fulfill specific human desires and are thus not universal). Creative good is the only good that meets the litany of requirements Wieman assigns

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 8. Emphasis original

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 79.

for a good to be categorized as an absolute goodness. An absolute good must be eternally trustworthy, one cannot have too much of it, and it is good in the same way to any observer whether they be human or worm.<sup>16</sup> The only goodness that does clear this impressive bar for Wieman is what he describes as the process of reorganization that occurs as a result of the increase of goodness that generates new meaning and new integrations of ideas that brings about a richer whole. In short, it is the act of creation itself, but more specifically creation with regards to the blossoming of new ideas and modes of understanding.<sup>17</sup>

Wieman cites his starting point of contending with creation by asserting that he is in greater adherence to what he refers to as “Jewish Christian Tradition”, which describes the sovereign goodness of the universe (God) as working creatively in history. He places this in contrast to what he calls the “Greek Christian Tradition” that perceives the sovereign goodness of the universe as a system of Forms or supreme Form.<sup>18</sup>

On this point Wieman and I diverge, as my theological construction of God cleaves much more closely to the concept of “God-as-Form(s)” than “God as Creative Agent.” But this is not the only discrepancy between our projects. Wieman is chiefly concerned with creating and/or uncovering an absolute goodness within the bounds of reality in the hopes that it might serve as a new Polaris in the pursuit of multiplying goodness for humanity. I am unconvinced that such a pure and uncontestably good goodness can be cited in our world at all, let alone exclusively within the act of creation. I am unconvinced that such a goodness needs to be searched for within our physical universe in the first place.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 79-80.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 7.

Unlike Wieman, I do not find it troubling to place absolute goodness in a position of transcendence. Absolute goodness, when transcendent, is simple—so simple that it cannot be fathomed within our complex world. To find his absolute goodness within the confines of the real universe, absolute good as Wieman frames it must come with a jarringly intricate set of subevents and components. Wieman insists that transcendental things, definitionally, don't *do* anything. But I do not think they need to *do* things at all. We can *be in relationship* with them.

And relationships are messy. Confusing. Unquantifiable and unqualifiable. I don't think that murkiness is something we need to run away from, but instead I think it is something that just *is*—wonderful and maddening all at once. Perhaps seeing goodness as forever through a frosted glass is counterproductive for the mission Wieman sets out on, but I am less concerned about developing a process for the production of goodness than I am about learning what it means to be in relationship with it.

Desire as well is something that I think Wieman too quickly discredits in an effort to streamline a search for the Absolute Good. Relationships are predicated upon fulfillment of desires. Desire, human or otherwise, is the very definition of complicated, unclear, messy, confusing, and even arbitrary. And yet, there can be no flourishing and no joy unless desire is respected and treated as an integral element of value, and goodness, from the get-go. The fact that desires differ and even come into conflict from person to person, being to being, is part and parcel of how goodness appears to us.

In Toni Morrison's essay *The Site of Memory* in her book *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, she writes, "therefore the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist

without human intelligence, but truth cannot.”<sup>19</sup> Goodness as we experience it is not a fact—but a truth. We have all experienced countless times how it wriggles and escapes being pinned down as an absolute. In any experience—whether it be a birthday party, finding an old photograph, or saying goodbye to a loved one—there is always foreshortening, lengthening, or warping that hidden vector of goodness in any number of ways that might change moment to moment and from person to person.

In 2016, the South African artist William Kentridge revealed his work *Triumphs and Laments* with a theatrical opening performance.<sup>20</sup> The work itself, a reverse-mural spanning 500 meters of the Tiber Wall along the Tiber River in Rome, was created by adhering stencils to the wall and power washing around them. What was left after the stencils were peeled away were ghostly images moving in silent procession along the wall—figures formed by the dark grime of the wall thrown into sharp contrast with their bright, newly cleaned surroundings. These figures took the form of episodes from the Italian peninsula’s past: Marcus Aurelius upon his horse, images of dead Dacian soldiers pulled directly from Trajan’s Column, Saint Teresa in ecstasy alongside the Renault from which Aldo Moro’s assassinated body was recovered in 1978. As the mural was revealed, two processions began to march towards each other from opposite ends of the 500-meter work. One side was composed of lamenters and mourning figures, and the other of revelers playing music and dancing. The two currents met in the middle, pulsing into each

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<sup>19</sup> Zinsser, William, Alfred Kazin, Russell Baker, Jill Ker Conway, Frank McCourt, Toni Morrison, Eileen Simpson, Gates, Henry Louis, Jr, Annie Dillard, and Ian Frazier. 1998. “*TONI MORRISON: The Site of Memory*.” In *Inventing the Truth*. United States: HarperCollins Publishers.

<sup>20</sup> “Triumphs and Laments”. William Kentridge. 2023. Kentridge.Studio. June 15, 2023. <https://www.kentridge.studio/projects/triumphs-and-laments/>.

other and swirling like dye dropped into a glass of water. Whose triumph is my lament? Whose lament is my triumph?

God/Goodness cannot exist in its fullness and simplicity in our meaningless and infinitely layered world, and so becomes refracted into something more complicated each and every time we come into contact with it. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The fact that our imperfect world cannot hold perfect, universal goodness is not a tragedy—it is merely the nature of what it means to be real. Reality is imperfect, multi-dimensional, complicated, and utterly beautiful because of it. The fact that the universe is cracked is how goodness can stream into it in arcing, branching shafts of lights that flicker and change based on our perspective, and that are only visible against the swirling dust of a tumultuous, stormy existence.

That moment when we come into relationship with goodness is at once an irruption of something transcendental into our universe as well as a celebration of that which was always there. It is a dual miracle wherein the meaningful unreal penetrates a meaningless reality, as well as a moment of connection with that golden thread of God that is inextricably woven into our lives. Goodness is an intangible God simultaneously persisting in and coming into our reality.

In working our way towards, within, around, and through the mystery of God, reason is not the only tool in our toolbox. Furthermore, I would hazard that it is not our best one for such a conundrum. When presented with any person, place, thing, object, or event, we do not simply apply principles, instructions, and heuristics to determine what about it is good—we *feel* what is right. Sometimes quite clearly, sometimes very much not. The fact that God/Goodness enters the world refracted is evidenced by the fact that goodness is experienced as relative and subjective. And the larger the scale, the greater the angle of refraction. Global wars, struggles, and ideological conflicts become messy, polarized, and confusing to the extent that locating a

universally recognizable aspect of God within them becomes nigh impossible or necessitates an often reductive taking of sides to determine whose truth is “right” and whose is “wrong”.

The theological work we are doing together is an exercise in finding God. And goodness is not assessed by reason alone. God is intuited. God is felt in our bones and in our belly. God is comprehended through the anger, fear, and joy we are blessed and burdened with as we make our way through life.

We see regularly, and painfully, that this faculty of God-feeling is not a prescribed experience. What one person considers moral and just may be appalling and reprehensible to the next. In light of this, we may be inclined to treat the individual experience of goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness, as a pitfall trap that leads to separation between humans and an egotism that places individual experience above the shared wisdom of humanity as it appears in art, poetry, science, and scripture. But to do so would elide the fact that our ability to feel goodness and intuit God in this manner is a profound gift that defines what it means to live a life worth living.

That part of us that is pulled towards goodness without any conscious effort, though imprecise and variable, is an irreplaceable facet of living life in this wild world, and in doing the theological work of finding, creating, and sharing God. The work we are called to is the journey of finding God in the way it snakes and slips from our grasp in one moment before appearing in full splendor the next.

# Omnipotence

When the question is as big as God, each and every answer we bring demands intense scrutiny. Thus, we must ask ourselves: is goodness enough?

It would be difficult to overestimate the outsized role St. Augustine, the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century Christian Church Father, plays in historic and contemporary Christian philosophy and theology. He too operates from the assumption that God is not only good but is goodness itself.<sup>21</sup> From there, though, Augustine encountered a dilemma. He considered it obvious and taken for granted that that which is immutable is more good than that which is mutable, and similarly for that which is inviolable over violable and incorruptible over corruptible. This led Augustine into a spiral of doubt because he wondered where his own corruption and propensity for sin came from. How could God—who is, necessarily for Augustine, an incorruptible and sinless being—was truly the author of Augustine’s own flawed existence.

Having converted to Christianity from the dualist beliefs of Manichaeism, Augustine became a vocal critic regarding what he viewed as the heretical position of the Manichaeans. Their position, which held that divine forces of Goodness were held in balance by equal and oppositional forces of Evil, became known as dualism. In opposition to dualist modes of thinking, Augustine was unwilling to attribute the ultimate origins of his own evil, or any evil, to Satan. If evil was created by Satan, it follows that Satan is therefore capable of creating something outside the realm of God’s creation. Should this be the case, Satan’s power would be at least in part on a plane equal to God’s. Or if Satan created evil in an act of carrying out God’s

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<sup>21</sup> Sheed, F. J., and Michael P. Foley. 2006. *Confessions*. 2nd ed. / edited, with notes, by Michael P. Foley. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co. 120.

bidding, this then transitively attributes the creation of Evil to God who is Goodness itself which brings us back to God being the ultimate author of evil.

Neither of these positions were acceptable conclusions to Augustine. So whence Evil? Augustine's conclusion began with radical reconsideration of what "corruption" entails. When something becomes corrupted, Augustine reasoned, it becomes damaged. And what is "damage" if not a diminishment of the object's goodness in some way? Thus, all things that are corruptible are good in that there is the possibility for that goodness to be damaged and lost. For Augustine, these damageable things are not the ultimate goodness because the ultimate goodness is necessarily beyond corruption, but nonetheless all things that are prone to corruption are good by virtue of being able to become less good. From there, Augustine concludes, all things are good until they are damaged to the point of ceasing to exist entirely. Thus, for Augustine, evil does not exist in and of itself—it is merely the deprivation of goodness just as coldness is the absence of heat.<sup>22</sup>

This prospect of all things being inherently good and of God has found purchase in the work and thoughts of countless teachers, sages, poets, artists, and theologians across time. Such a framework accomplishes something crucial: it allows for God to be good whilst explaining the presence of what we experience as evil in this world without limiting God's power in any way.

When we discussed God's worthiness previously, I asserted that my sole consideration for defining something as God was that the thing in question be absolutely good. For Augustine, though, there is another consideration, though not explicitly named as such. And that consideration is power. For Augustine, power becomes an element of God's goodness—in other

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 130.

words, God's ability to actively effect and affect goodness is a necessary element to God being good. If we are considering something that is goodness itself, but incapable of preventing forces other than goodness from interfering with goodness, then that thing does not qualify to be God in Augustine's perspective.

So, must God be all-powerful in order to be Goodness itself? Could a God that is unable to accomplish each and all its desires sufficient? For many, including Augustine, the answer is no.<sup>23</sup>

Power assumes agency. Power is only exercised by subjects who utilize said power to perform actions that result in desired outcomes. For God to be all-powerful, God must desire things and God must then perform actions in accordance with those desires so as to bring about their fruition. If power is a core attribute of Godly goodness, as an Augustinian perspective would assert, then such power would need to be absolute just as God's goodness is absolute. No obstacle or opposing power could limit or disturb God's own. This absolute power is, of course, referred to as omnipotence. Yet as simple as such a framework is, it creates a paradox.

For God to be omnipotent, God must be able to do anything that God wishes. However, by wishing in the first place we reveal a moment in time in which God's desires are unmet and requiring an action by God to rectify the universe. Even by asserting that God is unbound by

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<sup>23</sup> The idea of God being all-powerful reached an impressive zenith in the 14th century through the work of William of Ockham and his contemporaries. The medievalist scholar Dyan Elliott notes in her 2004 book *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* that William's intransigent teaching on God being all-powerful is "traditionally construed as the single most important factor in the collapse of the optimistic collaboration between faith and reason that characterized thirteenth-century scholasticism." (Page 239) God's power, for William, was categorically unconstrained by any rules, even those regarding morality or perceived goodness from a human perspective.

time, that only serves to immortalize both the moment of God's dissatisfaction as well as the eternity of the solved scenario.

The Augustinian assumption places a God that *can* do things against a God who *cannot* do things, but this is a binary that obscures an alternate possibility. I rather find it more compelling to understand God as the *object* of all exercises of power rather than an agent or subject who engages in such exercise. In addition to a God that *can* do things and a God that *can't* do things, I offer the *object* being sought after through action or inaction as God.

I understand goodness as that object that any action is trying to generate or seize. After all, if the imagined outcome were not good in some way, then the action would not have been executed. Omnipotence, then, can be reimagined not as an agent's capability to carry out any action of their choosing, but instead as the quality possessed by that thing which is the intention behind any and all actions and employments of power.

No being *does* something unless that action will improve things in some way. This is true whether the action in question is me slamming my palm inelegantly on the snooze button in the hopes of nine extra minutes of rest in the morning, or that of a hovering kestrel moving into freefall as she catches the sudden scurrying of potential prey running out from the brush, or that of a human rights trial lawyer working to protect the life and dignity of those who are being oppressed. Each of us—myself, the kestrel, and the lawyer—are seeking out goodness in some way, whether that is the goodness of ill-advised rest, slaking of hunger, or altruistic efforts to provide help to those who need it.

Though any action is undertaken in the pursuit of some kind of goodness (as understood and valued by the agent executing the action) no action in this chaotic universe is wholly good.

The snooze button may provide me with brief respite, but I will rue the action when nine minutes pass and I must wake up in a state of panic realizing that I have not left enough time for myself to get to work. The kestrel may experience the satisfaction of a successful hunt and a full stomach, but the mouse she has preyed upon will not share in that joy. Even the human rights lawyer's actions have thin wisps of not-goodness that whirl softly around the holy efforts she endeavors to complete—the defendant's anxiety, the browbeaten witness, the spouse at home resentful that the lawyer's work has taken so much time and attention away all coexist with the undeniable goodness of the pursuit of justice.

If God has agency, it must be a form of agency that is alien to us who operate in a impossibly complex world where goodness is necessarily morphed and refracted. But perhaps God does have a form of agency nonetheless—an agency that is beyond our comprehension.

Alternatively, we might understand God as action itself. God as verb. This is a perspective held by other theologians and has been famously articulated by the feminist theologian and Episcopal priest, Carter Heyward. From her first publication onwards, Heyward presents God not as an agent or an object, but as an action. She invites us, in the infinitive, “to God.”<sup>24</sup> In her 1999 book *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*, Heyward proposes “mutual relation” as the specific manner in which we can God as a verb, presenting genuine connection and mutuality as a more creative and generative manner in which we can engage with each other and with the divine as opposed to a relationship rooted in simple obedience.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Heyward, Carter. 1982. *The Redemption of God: a Theology of Mutual Relation*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America. 172.

<sup>25</sup> Heyward, Carter. 1999. *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be Christian*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 20.

If such a vision is compelling, and we do seek to understand God as a verb, then I contend that all previous arguments regarding the ultimacy of Goodness for God still hold. If God is a verb, then “to God”, as Heyward puts it, must be an action that attempts to achieve the absolute highest good. No action in our universe can do this perfectly, but that hasn’t stopped humans from trying “to God” as best they can with what tools they have since time immemorial.

Ultimately, perhaps our agency, and the agencies of all things in this universe, cannot be separated from God. Nor can our actions—the things that we *do* in pursuit of a better universe. What is certain is that insofar as God itself acts to promote healing, mercy, and righteousness, God does so because that is what *we* are doing to the best of our humble abilities. God performs miracles because this world is rife with miracles large and small—from the world-shaping work of prophets and truth-speakers across history, to the experience of pure joy as we laugh at something meaningless and silly with a dear friend.

We say, “justice will prevail”, as though justice itself will take up arms. But justice only prevails when we make it so. Hope triumphs, but it only triumphs when we shoulder the responsibility of being its emissaries. We are the mechanism through which goodness is brought into this world, and the clarion call to bring that goodness into being rests with us. We cannot cast off our accountability onto God. God loves because we love.

# **Section II**

## **Idols**

# The Swamp

It was in 2022, during the days when summer bled softly and comfortably into autumn, that I realized I needed to visit the swamp. The air was turning imperceptibly from a sticky, smooth hot to a crisp cold that bristled gamely against one's skin.

The swamp, the name by which I have affectionately known it for as long as I remember, is a tiny nature sanctuary only a few blocks away from where I now live and from where I grew up. I have many fond memories of parsing my way over the gnarled roots bursting through the half-kempt pathways that spiderweb through the reserve. Of climbing over the bulging, bulbous, amorphous boulders of Roxbury puddingstone that are scattered throughout the wending pathways like ancient watchtowers. As a child, I figured that this swamp was a massive, unexplored wilderness only partially glimpsed by humans—and only by humans with the right amount of derring-do. As an adult, I now know that the swamp is humbler than that. There are few places within that are further than a football field away from a parking lot, school, or suburban cul-de-sac.

By the fall of 2022, my son was only a couple of months old. My wife and I were settling into routines and, as quickly as possible, mastering the new litany of skills and tasks that had come to predominate our days: changing diapers, sanitizing bottles, bouncing the baby when his colic flared, and so on. We were happy and exhausted, as new parents generally are. My wife and baby were, as they are now, the most important things in the world to me and I loved them then, as I love them now, with all of my being.

But something wasn't right. My head wasn't right. My heart wasn't right. At seemingly random and unforeseeable moments, I felt overcome by the sensation that I was drowning—and that feeling was often accompanied by an unconquerable, hissing tension that stuck in my gut telling me that I deserved to feel even worse.

It would be several months before I could name what was happening to me. I was suffering from post-partum depression. But during the summer and early autumn months, the sense of sorrow, of feeling overwhelmed, and of inwardly directed anger that appeared seemingly at random was unnamable and unconquerable. Compounding all of this, it was something I was deeply embarrassed and ashamed to be affected by—why am I feeling this way? Do I not love my family enough?

According to the Cleveland Clinic, as many as one-in-four fathers experience post-partum depression, and the symptoms are generally recognizable if you know what to look for.<sup>26</sup> But at that time, I had no clue. Usually, I was happy, and I loved my baby, my wife, and the new life we were figuring out together. But those moments of crushing emotion would time and time again come roaring in. I felt awful—and then felt worse by insisting to myself that I was a terrible father and husband for feeling this way.

On one of these days, as I came down from a bout of this depression, my wife suggested that I visit the swamp. I had neither thought about nor set foot in the swamp in months. Momentarily, I was confused that my wife—who only infrequently accompanied me to the

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<sup>26</sup> Clinic, Cleveland. 2024. "Yes, Postpartum Depression in Men Is Very Real." Cleveland Clinic. March 19, 2024. <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/yes-postpartum-depression-in-men-is-very-real>.

swamp—suggested something so seemingly out of the blue. Almost immediately, though, I was seized by the sudden knowledge that she was right. Incredibly right. I had to visit the swamp.

We had suffered a drought recently, and as I entered the swamp, I realized that I could see some of the physical symptoms of this drought as clearly as birthmarks, or wounds, on skin. The crispness of the yellowed tufts of grass along the trails; the ponds, pools, and creeks that wound through the swamp like veins were rendered into tiny puddles; and the cracked, dull colored flats that sat in the place of the usual sucking pits of gooey mud. I wandered the swamp, and after some time I found myself standing before the broken up remains of a bridge. This bridge was the same one I loved as a child. Many years ago, it led to what I referred to as “The Heart of the Swamp”—a wooden platform built around the thick trunk of a venerable tree. It was, in reality, far from the center of the swamp, but to my child’s mind this was the place where the whole swamp *was* in some unplaceable way.

Decades later, I was now standing before the splintered bits of bridge that stretched only a few feet from the dry trail into the usually impassable, mucky swamp. And I realized—the swamp was not so muddy today. The drought had, just for a moment in time, created a dry bridge of caked mud right where the old wooden bridge used to pierce into the cattails, twisting vines, and gnarled trees rising out of the loamy earth.

I followed that trail. I pieced my way carefully, and as respectfully and gracefully as I could manage through the overgrown brush until I found myself at the Heart of the Swamp. I sat down right there in the dried mud at the base of the grizzled trunk of the stout, old tree, and I listened.

And as I listened, I heard the oddest bird. My eyes were drawn upward until my sight rested on a tiny, grey little thing sitting in the crook of a Y-shaped tree that had long ago been blasted by an errant strike of lightning. I sat and listened to that strange bird as it *meowed* at me.

I was perplexed. Then enchanted. And then I was full of joy, and for the first time in quite some time I was fully at peace. I watched and listened as this silly little thing *meowed* at me from a tree and I was taken by this ridiculous, but utterly unshakable thought that this tiny bird was God.

That Grey Catbird's (as I later learned was the species of bird in question) catlike song followed me as I pieced my way back through the cattails, vines, and tree trunks to the trail. And, in a different way, that song followed me further. I went home, talked to my wife, and agreed to find myself some needed help from a trusted place.

That bird was just a bird. That bird almost certainly regarded me only as a mild interest or potential (if unwinged and impotent) threat rather than as a creature in need of healing and help. And yet, it healed me. Or, at the very least, it became the catalyst I needed to start that rocky path towards letting myself heal and be healed.

What does it mean that this odd little bird, completely without my or its consent, became the most vibrant and obvious avenue for God that I had experienced in a long time? What does it mean to find God in a bird, in a stone, in a stained glass window, in a story, in a toy, or in a statue? Who decides where God gets to burst into being?

# A Volatile Term

Idolatry is not exactly considered a hot-button issue in the contemporary Western world. At its most innocuous, idolatry is a topic regarded by many—atheists and theists alike—as an anachronistic curiosity. Of the Mosaic Decalogue, God’s primary admonition that “You shall have no other Gods before me”<sup>27</sup> seems as easy to follow as it is wholly unhelpful in guiding modern conceptions of ethics and goodness. A simple glance around one’s home is enough to confirm: no mysterious idols here; let’s move on to more pressing concerns in the Ten Commandments about murder, thievery, and such.

But not all invocations of the term idolatry are so harmless. In considering idolatry, I must begin by recognizing the power behind the term and the way this concept has been used and is still used today to subjugate and denigrate; separate and execrate.

The charge of idolatry has a long, storied history in interreligious and interdenominational conflict. In the still unfolding story of settler colonialism, the tendrils of many of today’s social injustices and tragedies find their roots in the tendency for invading persons to castigate the beliefs of those who stand in the way of their conquest as void or nonexistent. The Indigenous peoples of America were considered by Europeans to be devoid of true religion and through this charge the Europeans felt justified in stripping the indigenous peoples and communities they came across of their humanity and, subsequently, of their land and their lives.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Exodus 20:3. (All Biblical passages cited use NIV translation, unless otherwise noted.)

<sup>28</sup> “Decolonial Approaches to the Study of Religion: Teaching Native American and Indigenous Religious Traditions | Religious Studies News.” n.d. <https://rsn.aarweb.org/spotlight-on/teaching/anti-racism/decolonial->

Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in an essay entitled “Idolatry in Comparative Perspective”, wrote that, “‘Idolatry’, by definition in its literal usage denigrates the position of one’s neighbor by leaving out the transcendence of his or her position.”<sup>29</sup> Idolatry, then, becomes the act of denying another’s experience of the divine as less than transcendent—as false or inadequate. In the introduction to this essay on the subject, Smith lays out his suspicion of the term quite bluntly by informing us that he personally has not used the term, either in writing or even when speaking, for several decades.

With conviction, Smith recalls his assertion from many years ago that kicked off his boycott of ever using the term ‘idolatry’, “No one has ever worshipped an idol. Some have worshipped God in the form of an idol; that is what idols are for.”<sup>30</sup> His words are evocative of the perspective of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Church Father, St. Basil who, in defending use of icons in worship, advised that, “That honor given to the image passes to the archetype.”<sup>31</sup>

Smith’s claim, moving a fair bit beyond Basil’s defense of Christian iconography, asserts that *all* idols serve to worship an archetype. No one worships or has worshipped idols in and of themselves. To claim so is to intentionally misunderstand the role idols play in worship. To claim so is merely to attempt to delegitimize another’s experience of the sacred.

Is idolatry, then, a term exclusively useable as a weapon? In reflecting with great care on the term, Smith offers us this, “My immediate proposal is to suggest that in its metaphorical

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[approaches#:~:text=Indigenous%20peoples%20in%20the%20Americas%20were%20understood%20to,ideologies%20to%20justify%20Indigenous%20enslavement%2C%20genocide%2C%20and%20dispossession.](#)

<sup>29</sup> Knitter, Paul F., and John Hick. 1987. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>31</sup> St. John of Damascus. *First Treatise*. In *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*. Louth, Andrew. 2003. 1st ed. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. 35.

sense, our words ‘idol’ and ‘idolatry’ might prove helpful... by calling attention to the danger of leaving it [the transcendent experience of our neighbor] out.<sup>32</sup> Thus Smith flips the concept of sectarian and accusatory forms of idolatry on its head. How might we be failing to understand, share, and appreciate the holy by insisting upon one and only one approach to it? How might our neighbor’s story help us share in new ways of celebrating and manifesting goodness?

Smith wonders how we might think about idolatry in a new way. An expansive way. A way that cautions us against our ego and would have us pause in our tracks to say: how can I alone possibly have all the answers? All people, even those whom we hate, have a unique relationship with goodness from which we can learn. But this learning occurs only if we do the work of humility. The challenging self-humiliation of allowing ourselves to say, “I don’t know everything, and I’m ready to listen.”

Let us then embark on a little walk into the idea of idolatry. It is a walk that I hope might lead us on an ever-widening path towards God. A path that leads through swamps, scripture, and history. A winding way which relies upon us to be willing to listen to our own convictions, the convictions of others, and to that small still voice of God wherever we may be blessed to find it. Who knows where we might hear it today. Maybe in a tale about a golden calf. Maybe in the words of a man on a cross. Maybe even from a silly little bird, meowing at us from the branches of a dead tree.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 58.

# Wealth and Nature; Life and Death

How might an ethical, humble, and generative theology concerning idols and idolatry be developed? In asking this question, it is critical to note that even well-meaning theology can echo the harmful history of using charges of idolatry to justify abuse and dehumanization. For instance, wealth and greed seem like obvious idols to abhor—it would be a rare theologian who would try to promote these as objects worthy of worship—but even in decrying obvious evils as idols, one can still fall into old tropes that propagate harm in unanticipated ways.

Recently, as of the time of this writing, Pagans and Pagan communities have issued responses detailing their shock and disappointment over an article written by Rabbi David Wolpe that was published in *The Atlantic* on Christmas Day, 2023. In Rabbi Wolpe’s article, he describes two forms of idolatry he sees as threatening in society and describes them as associated with both the left and right of the political spectrum:

*Although paganism is one of those catchall words applied to widely disparate views, the worship of natural forces generally takes two forms: the deification of nature, and the deification of force. In the modern world, each ideological wing has claimed a piece of paganism as its own. On the left, there are the world-worshippers, who elevate nature to the summit of sanctity. On the right, you see the worship of force in the forms of wealth, political power, and tribal solidarity. In other words, the paganism of the left is a kind of pantheism, and the paganism of the right is a kind of idolatry. Hug a tree or a dollar bill, and the pagan in you shines through.*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Wolpe, David. 2023. “The Return of the Pagans.” *The Atlantic*, December 25, 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/12/paganism-right-and-left/676945/>.

For Wolpe, both “paganisms”, left and right—nature-deifying and force-deifying, deny their adherents the possibility of humility. Wolpe contends that without the anchor of a monotheistic God, the message of religion ceases to be about how can humans help each other in service to God and becomes focused on how individuals might employ ritual to their own especial benefit.

On the right, Wolpe claims, this is achieved through the ascendancy of the idols of wealth, greed, and power that justify mistreatment of others in favor of self-improvement. On the left, Wolpe argues that the dismissal of God leads to a deification of an idolized form of nature that renders humans indistinguishable from other forms of life. To illustrate the harm that arises from this nature idolatry, Wolpe cites a philosopher who claims that in the case of a child whose, “life is not one that is going to be a benefit for the child or for their family,” the child’s life should be ended. Wolpe dryly compares this position to that of a horse being taken shot to take it out of its misery asking, “If we are all animals, why morally elevate an infant over a horse?” For Wolpe, the idolatrous worship of nature leads to a return of the “laws of the jungle”—the same dog-eat-dog condition that the wealth-worship of the right promotes.

After the publication of Wolpe’s article, the response from Pagans—Pagans who genuinely self-identify as such rather than the constructed categories described by Wolpe—has been that of disappointment and anger. Detractors have pointed out that the contemporary context of Paganism is much richer than Wolpe suggests and exists as a complex of varied histories and faiths and movements. Other responses to Wolpe’s argument take umbrage with the suggestion that a Monotheistic view is necessary for social morality. This insistence, critics point out, is offensive to far more religious groups than just Pagans.<sup>34</sup> Finally, it has been rightly

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<sup>34</sup> Hall, Nathan M. 2024. “Rabbi David Wolpe’s Pagans Aren’t the Ones I Know.” Religion News Service. January 2, 2024. <https://religionnews.com/2024/01/02/rabbi-david-wolpes-pagans-arent-the-ones-i-know/>.

noted that the individuals Wolpe cites as contemporary pagan exemplars—Musk and Trump—identify as an atheist and a Christian, respectively, rather than as Pagans.<sup>35</sup>

Overall, the pushback seems to be earmarked by frustration. Responses by Pagans to Wolpe’s article indicate that they are in fact in agreement with Wolpe when he denounces wealth and power and says that they cannot be held as the ultimate concerns of society or of individuals. The aggravation comes with the fact that Wolpe loops nature-worship and, in fact, any form of worship that does not align with Abrahamic perspectives of a singular God-figure into the idea of wealth and power elevated to Godlike status.

Wolpe is far from the only modern theologian to relate the concept of idolatry to greed and accumulation of wealth. The Catholic priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, considered the most prominent figure within the Latin American Liberation Theology movement, wove an incisive critique of idolatry as a worship of wealth into his book *God of Life* initially published in 1989,

*Wealth, too [along with idols], is the product of human activity. Human beings fall into idolatry when they rank gold and silver above those who have made them, thus allowing themselves to be seduced by the success of their own handiwork... The god of idolatry is a murderous god. A great deal of blood is shed because of the desire for money... The yearning for money and power stops at nothing; it tramples underfoot the rights of others and disregards the commandments of the God who calls for the protection of the poor and oppressed.*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “The Sad Irony of David Wolpe Talking Sh\*t About Pagans.” n.d. Daily Kos. <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2024/1/9/2215660/-The-Sad-Irony-of-David-Wolpe-Talking-Sh-t-About-Pagans>.

<sup>36</sup> Gutiérrez, Gustavo. 1991. *The God of Life*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books. 52-53.

Gutiérrez' theology and mission was in service to those who suffered under oppressive conditions generated and maintained by the greed of others. Gutiérrez did not merely talk the talk, he lived and ministered in his native Peru consistently bearing witness to the conditions of violence and subjugation that pervaded the lived experience of those he loved and cared for as a friend, shepherd, and servant. When Gutiérrez writes about the God of Life, he insists that such a God must necessarily stand in opposition to death. Death is murder, and murder is the true nature of what is wrought when the idol of wealth is placed before God and transmuted into as the prime object of faith.

For Gutiérrez, the idolatry of wealth becomes, when examined, the worship of death. This is the result of his theology which presents God as being the God of Life. If God is the God of Life, then all forms of idolatry and false worship must necessitate moving away from life and thus towards its antithesis: death.

Taking the approach to idolatry suggested by Smith, we can explore how this term can clarify why self-satisfaction and greed cannot possibly be God. It allows us to contrast the diminutive and expressly individualistic "good" derived from the pleasure of accumulating wealth with the perspectives of those who suffer as a result of that accumulation. In allowing for the transcendent experience of our neighbor, we let the voices of those who are oppressed alert us to the faultiness of wealth as a stand-in for God.

Yet before we move on from Gutiérrez, I want to take the opportunity to push the idea of idolatry further. Wealth is an obvious example of something that could not possibly be God. But what about Gutiérrez's assertion that God is *Life*? Life is indeed wonderful, and God is easily visible in its multitudinous manifestations within our universe. Shaggy birch trees shedding their papery bark, ponderously elegant bull moose grazing lazily at the edge of a frosty river, the

iridescent shell of a jewel-like beetle glimmering as it trundles unnoticed through the humus of the forest floor. Gutiérrez's theology and its presentation of life as the highest holiness is nothing short of beautiful, and he makes a clear, uncompromising case for why it is that he perceives God as Life. So it is, I admit, a little silly to proceed with this exercise in finding ways that God is other than life, but I do want to explore how our new consideration idolatry can help us move ever closer to God regardless of how close we believe we might be.

Like Gutiérrez, I understand God as that ultimacy which is uniquely deserving of worship, respect, and service. Unlike Gutiérrez, I do not perceive life as being that object. Or, at least, I do not think life is the *sole* form that this object of ultimacy takes. If God is life and life is God, then certainly that which diverges from life (that is, death or abiotic states of not-living) is unholy and requires us to move away from it or even to seek its extirpation. If Death/not-living is truly the reverse of the divine—of God itself—then it must be wholly irredeemable.

And yet that is not so. It would be foolish to say that Death on the general level is a good thing—we have all experienced too much sorrow from the reality of death. However, treating it as directly in opposition to God belies what goodness can and does exist in death. Doing so only serves to make the reality of death much more frightening and harder to bear.

All of us must die. But the nature of our deaths varies vastly. Death can come as a quiet end surrounded by love just as it can come as a surprise. And death can come as a mercy just as it can come as a tragedy. Sometimes it comes as both simultaneously. Even if death is predominantly locatable within the domain of scariness and sadness, it is not as a concept wholly removed from goodness. Recognizing this fact is crucial for allowing us to approach death with grace and peace.

In my work in hospital chaplaincy, I have been blessed to be able to witness many families experiencing connection with each other in times of love, loss, grief, sorrow, hardship, joy, memory, and hope. Often all at the same time. Death, like all things, is complicated—it is not just good or just bad. Some deaths were intensely challenging, untimely, and earth-shatteringly sad. Some deaths were peaceful, with the whole family around the bedside making amends, sharing memories, and letting their loved one know it was okay to take this next, quiet step into what may come. From the peaceful deaths to the undeniably hard deaths, I consider each of those patients and families my teachers from whom I have learned much about the many-layered nature of how we experience death.

From my place of perception, God is life, but God is not *merely* life and God is not *entirely* life. Just as God is neither merely nor entirely death. God exists in both spaces, but only within what *goodness* is present within life and within death. All that is good in life is God. All that is good in death is God. All else is a result of the chaotic world in which we live. Death and life, as they appear in the physical universe, are meaningless and random events. But the fact that we experience goodness and/or a dearth of goodness in those events is how they become saturated with meaning. This is the process by which we seek God, and the way we create and uncover goodness in our universe. With a willingness to approach not only life but also death as a possible avenue towards God, we reveal God more fully.

God is Life, but life is not uniquely God. So, might it make sense to keep Gutiérrez' general approach to idolatry, but shift the binary? Perhaps we can simply translate his life/death binary to the admittedly less elegant but perhaps more inclusive good/bad battlefield and move then to identify idolatry with worship of that which is “bad” and proper worship of God to be

worship of that which is “good”? In short, I believe such a strategy would be neither accurate nor helpful.

Death, as previously demonstrated, is not wholly bad and thus not wholly divorced from Godliness. That being said, I cannot and do not make the case that death is overall a good thing; that would be an immensely challenging if not outright impossible task. Instead, I argue that death is complicated and there is goodness and badness inherent to death all wadded together and rolled up in complicated and inextricable ways. These things are not static.

The goodness experienced in someone’s death is dependent on the observer—who they are and when they are. A young woman holding their grandfather’s hand as he peacefully slips away may in one moment feel joy in being able to help provide her loved one with a dignified death, but in the very next be seized by a wracking fear and guilt that she has not done enough, becoming crushed by the reality that her grandpa is about to die in an austere hospital bed. These warring emotions, seemingly mutually exclusive, nevertheless exist in tandem. They ceaselessly flicker back and forth in power as they wax and wane against each other and against a whole slew of other thoughts, each and every one an admixture of goodness, badness, and countless other variables (I am so glad my uncle made it here in time—I wonder if grandpa is excited by the thought that he might see grandma again—I remember coming out to grandpa in my second year of college and he was so sweet about it—I wonder how much pain he is in right now). Each person present in the room is swirling in their own differing conflux of emotions—good, bad, in-between—with each family member experiencing the current event against a backdrop of their own memories, experiences, relationships, impulses, and personality.

The conclusion we come to is that God being all that is good sounds incredibly simple—and it is—but seeking that simplicity becomes a monumental challenge given the nature of our

random, stochastic universe. Goodness in and of itself is just too straightforward to exist unchallenged and unadulterated in a world as layered and interconnected as our own. Goodness, in and of itself, is not real. Something so simple and pure cannot be real when reality itself is so profoundly multifaceted and interlaced. By asking about idolatry, we keep ourselves from getting too comfortable: this experience or feeling might be God, but *where else* might we find God? There is no one true path.

# Ways of Worship

Goodness in and of itself, simple and unadulterated, is not something we can fully and perfectly imagine, anchored as we are in this world. Therefore, God is not immediately accessible in its totality. Goodness must be approached not as a discrete concept with definite contours and boundaries, but instead as a *throughline*; that ineffable thing that binds together experiences that we recognize as Good and Holy. We know Goodness through how we experience love, pleasure, life, friendship, satisfaction, and even, I assert, in seemingly less-than-holy activities such as the acquisition of wealth. But none of these things are Goodness in itself. After all, badness (that is, the removal of goodness for oneself or another being) can arise from the pursuit or achievement of love, pleasure, life, friendship, and satisfaction. Despite that, each of us has experienced how each one of these things is shot through somehow with an unisolatable goodness. That goodness is God.

God's nature is not other-worldly because it is too arcane, mystical, or enigmatic for mere mortals to comprehend. It is other-worldly because *our world* is too arcane, mystical, and enigmatic for simple goodness to exist. Or at least to exist in a manner that allows us to access it in ways other than through implicit connection, intuition, and juxtaposition. And so, I return to the concept of idolatry to make a claim that I anticipate will be initially perplexing, maybe even vexing, to theist and atheist alike.

We need idols.

More than that, we need many idols. Mountains of them. We need your idols, my idols, and the idols of others. But we need to learn how to hold them gently. To hold them with

reverence, for they bring us to God. But to also hold them lightly, skeptically, knowing that they take us to God imperfectly and may thus cause harm.

We need idols, but we cannot become idolatrous.

It is imperative to know how to let go of something when we learn that it causes another injury, and how to differentiate the goodness we find through idols from those idols themselves. God must remain an ever-fixed point on the horizon. We cannot allow ourselves to give up and fall short. We must practice holding ourselves steady as we traverse shifting sands on our journey to reach something unreachable.

If God is that ultimate object that is solely and completely worthy of human adulation and striving, then God cannot be other than that which is good. But, if God is indeed goodness itself, then God cannot permeate into our world in way in a way that is un-augmented for there is no absolute goodness within the confines of this universe. We must, then, seek God through its manifestations, imperfect though they may be. To approach God and propagate goodness in a meaningless universe, we must work with the tools we have.

If someone understands God as most visible through love, I can learn from that person. I can learn how love strengthens them and gives meaning and shape to their life. I can witness how love invigorates this person to live well and to serve others. However, as important as love is, this person must learn to hold love gently, knowing that others' experiences with love have produced heartbreak—even fear, grief, and loss. This person must appreciate that for some, love does not lead cleanly to God. And should love on some dark day prove insufficient, they must know there are other pathways available.

The same is true even for something less transcendent than love. I know nothing about Fantasy Football, but I once sailed with a deckhand for whom it was the end-all-and-be-all. From him, I saw that the goodness he derived from this activity in the form of companionship, competition, satisfaction, and belonging brought comfort and joy to him. Despite the fact that I think that Fantasy Football is far from the only way we can approach God (and one that does not personally inspire me), it is meaningful to see how others, like my friend, find goodness in ways that would never have occurred to me. Fantasy Football, of all things, provides me with a new way to imagine how I might find and invite God in. But, I am sorry to say, despite the help it can offer in searching for God, Fantasy Football cannot take the place of God.

All idols must be recognized as pathways to the ultimate goodness rather than Gods in and of themselves, and there are certainly idols that display more clearly the need to be able to let go of idols when they cause more harm than good. Hate groups, for instance, likely provide for those who are drawn to them a sense of purpose, belonging, and camaraderie in a way that is analogous to the Fantasy Football example. But clearly those small, personal fulfillments pale in comparison to the harm perpetrated by the group onto others and onto humanity writ large.

These groups rely on the goodness inherent in feelings of purpose and belonging to perpetuate violence and oppression. Identifying these groups as idols allows us to take seriously the fact that they do have an appeal to some. It lets us ask, “what is it about these groups, that are so obviously abhorrent to me, that is drawing people?”. People would not join in if there was a complete absence of goodness to be derived from membership. These are idols that in the end lead those who follow them leagues further from God rather than closer, but by understanding what about them draws adherents we can learn what it is that people are missing and are hungering for. Perhaps I am naïve or foolish, but I do not think people generally crave violence

and oppression as ends in and of themselves. Rather, people desire the comfort and certainty that they believe wielding violent and oppressive power can offer them.

But this lust for comfort and certainty, borne from fear, comes to replace goodness as the highest concern. Thus, they come to replace God and so the whole endeavor becomes idolatrous. There are better, holier ways to celebrate and search for comfort and certainty that do not deny many in the name of the few. Recognizing that even comfort and certainty are idols that fall short of God can help us illuminate why a group that secures good for some by perpetrating harm on others can never be an appropriate means for worshipping, enacting, and following God.

Broadly speaking, the multitudinous concepts that are most oft attributed to God such as comfort and certainty, love, life, justice, peace, and so on are very good indeed. But none of these is goodness in and of itself, and each one can be harmful and thus not good in each manifestation. For instance, peace is generally good, but what about the peace of the return to a status quo that results from silencing the voice of the oppressed? Love is good, but there is much danger found in unrequited love that does not take no for an answer. Justice is good, but the justice a vigilante brings about will not be universally felt by the family now deprived of a loved one.

None of this is to say that we should not attribute love, life, peace, and justice to God. I am not positing a radical *via negativa* in which God is unknowable and undefinable. At the very minimum, we need goodness in our lives to survive and to make life worth living, even if goodness as we can experience it is complex. Survival is not a solo sport—humans are altruistic creatures, and we implicitly understand that goodness unshared is not goodness at all. We want to find goodness, create goodness, and importantly we want to share that goodness as far and as wide as our little human arms can possibly reach.

The fact that God can only be approached from an angle does not seem to me a reason to give up the task of finding and sharing God. Instead, I am taking recourse to that peculiar, anachronistic little imposition put forward by God: “You shall have no other Gods before me.”

In some translations, this admonition reads “You shall have no other Gods *besides* me”, but either formulation fits. Life, love, and individual experiences that contain goodness are idols because they are not pure goodness in and of themselves. But we cannot experience goodness without them—pure goodness is not likely to just show up some day. And I cannot know goodness or share goodness with others without thinking fondly about times when I have been blessed to experience goodness. I know goodness by looking back into my life, as though through countless apertures. As if I am viewing God through a kaleidoscope of one thousand stained glass windows.

I have been close to God during afternoons at the park with my wife and baby, through the thrill of passing my Merchant Marine licensing exams during my days at Maine Maritime Academy, and within the gratitude and relief I felt after preaching my first sermon to a receptive and enthusiastic audience at the First Religious Society Unitarian Universalist in Newburyport, Massachusetts. I need these memories to serve as access points for my understanding of goodness and how it can be experienced by myself and others. Through my experiences at the park, I know of the goodness of family, comfort, and stability, and I can use that embodied knowledge to pursue the creation of a world where all families are allowed to be together in peace and without fear. Through my memories of passing my exams and making my first wobbling steps down the path of professional ministry, I understand the goodness of accomplishment, self-satisfaction, and the joy of being able to share what I have to offer with others.

These memories and experiences serve as avenues to God/goodness, and it is through them that I can understand and partake in goodness, as well as learn ways in which to spread that goodness to others. Since these experiences are *not* God but instead ways *to* God, they are idols. But God's cautioning of Moses and his community against idolatrousness in the Book of Exodus does not mean we should disregard these avenues—only that we must not place them *before* or *beside* God.

Even acquiring wealth is not entirely devoid of goodness—if it were, there would be no impetus to pursue it in any form. In acquiring wealth, one experiences goodness in the form of comfort in financial stability, procurement of creature comforts and pleasures, the satisfaction of a quantifiable form of social success, and the joy of freedom in being able to pursue one's own whims un beholden to the confines imposed by others or by the socially embedded restrictions that are placed on those who does not have disposable capital.

Comfort, pleasure, self-identity, and freedom are indeed good and are thus an aspect of God. Appreciating these goodnesses as pathways to God would be a form of acceptable idolatry—that is using one's experience of things containing goodness to be able to celebrate and spread further goodness in this world. In such an example, one might dedicate themselves to using their wealth to assure that comfort, stability, peace, and freedom are accessible to all rather than to just oneself. Unacceptable idolatry occurs when the experience that contains goodness—here the acquisition of wealth—*becomes* God to they who engage in that endeavor. The acquisition of wealth then becomes a stand-in for goodness in and of itself, and therefore anything unrelated or in opposition to that task becomes badness. Thus, goodness is supplanted by the idol that contains only a whisper of goodness. God is replaced by greed.

Humans do not seek evil—we seek goodness. Evil arises when we fall short and relinquish our responsibility to pursue the never-ending search for good. The nature of temptation is the pull to become satisfied in letting true goodness fall by the wayside in favor of seeking out only a narrow, selfish experience of that goodness.

Even in the examples from my own memories—a day in the park with my family, passing my licensing exams, and preaching my first sermon—are only acceptable idolatries insofar as I recognize in them a current of unplaceable goodness and strive to celebrate and recreate that goodness to the greatest extent possible for as many people as possible. Unacceptable idolatries would replace God with the actions that contain God. Thus, the idol of family could be used to cultivate an idolatrous theology of looking only after one's family at the expense of the neighbor and stranger's comfort. The idol of success could turn my meagre accomplishments into disdain and derision for those who have not achieved success in similar ways. The idol of a well-received sermon could supplant the need to seek and share Goodness with pride, vanity, and a continued yearning for people to feed me praise.

In short, in this framework there are theologically permissible and an impermissible approaches to idols. The appropriate consideration for idols is to use them, whether they be physical or mental, to locate God as it appears in our world and propel us closer to transcendental absolute goodness. The inappropriate tack would be idolatry—the displacement of God entirely in favor of the idol itself and embarking on the pursuit of just one imperfect path to goodness at the expense of others and at the expense of self.

If one is to accept this framework, it would altogether be too easy to view the need for idols to approach God as a great tragedy. Perceiving the world's chaotic meaninglessness as so alien to the simplicity of God that we can only approach God indirectly does not, perhaps,

immediately evoke feelings of closeness to that which is sacred. But I do not wish to overlook the great gift that we have been given. God is refracted in innumerable manifestations of goodness in this universe. A light erupting from an infinite prism. And so, instead of encountering direct and simple goodness, we move through life amidst a breathtaking diversity of ways to experience God. When I speak about finding God through worldly idols, I am celebrating the fact that we witness goodness as a never ending torrent of unique manifestations like so many drops of rain in an eternal downpour enveloping our existence.

We laugh with God when a ladybug lands on our arm, interrupting our walk from the parking lot to the grocery store. We sigh in satisfaction with God when we slip into a warm bath to soothe our aching muscles after a day of labor. We experience the quiet profundity of rebirth and resurrection with God every spring when new petals rise from buds on long-slumbering trees. We serve alongside God, shoulder to shoulder, when we volunteer at a free kitchen to provide sustenance and human kindness to folks who have need for both.

Our world is shot through with holiness. This physical universe is imperfect, wild, messy, and without inherent meaning. And it is beautiful beyond description. Every nook and cranny of our universe is glittering with the possibility of bringing goodness into being in a brand-new way. Every time we meet God, God is different and yet eternally the same.

# Ibn ‘Arabī and Jami

Much of my perception of idolatry, and my insistence that it is helpful when self-applied in a spirit of openness, I owe to two historical figures. Thus far, we have spent our time with Christian theologians as Christian history is the bundle of threads that I am most comfortable trying to chase and untangle. However, I would be remiss if I did not bring up the incredible theological work done by two Muslim scholars of the Sufi tradition: Ibn ‘Arabī and Jami.

The term Islam itself has long been translated as “submission”, however recently it has been argued that this transliteration does not fully capture the nuances of behavior and attitude the term Islam calls on its followers to abide by. In his recent article *Unearthing Abraham’s Altar: The Cultic Dimensions of dīn, islām, and ḥanīf in the Qur’an*, Professor Mohsen Goudarzi argues for a deeper, more nuanced interpretation of three key terms as they appear in the Qur’an. One of the terms that Goudarzi seeks to explore is the word “Islam” itself. Rather than settling for directly translating *islām* as submission, Goudarzi writes,

*Islām signifies “complete dedication” or “exclusive devotion” to God, often of an individual’s entire existence but other times of specific offerings or actions in a cultic setting. In the former sense, the idea of islām as complete devotion is not far from the notion of “submission.” When islām pertains to cultic actions or offerings, however, the ideas of “submission” or “surrender” do not convey accurately the meaning of islām, which signifies the devotion of specific offerings or acts of worship to Allāh alone and the refusal to make such dedications to other deities. Therefore, in most instances translating*

*islām as “complete/exclusive devotion” or “dedication” is preferable insofar as it is applicable both to the general and the cultic meanings of islām.*<sup>37</sup>

Though submission certainly is a major thrust within the term *islām*, there is more at work within the term. A second crucial element to *islām* is exclusivity of devotion—the admonition that worship, prayer, and rituals are to be offered solely to God and to no other object. Clarifying this aspect of *islām* is not a minor distinction—the strict adherence to monotheism is a critical throughline in the Qur’an. The Qur’anic argument of self-justification relies heavily on its presentation of the Qur’anic community as being the true heirs to the pure monotheism of Abraham which had been lost or squandered by the other Children of Israel—the Jews and Christians.

Therefore, not only is the Qur’an replete with dire warnings against idolators, but the term “Islam” itself also carries with it the guidance to look only to God in worship. However, that call to look towards none other than God has been interpreted in many ways. One of the most intriguing treatments of this concept was crafted by the Sufi teacher and exegete Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Arabī al-Ṭā’ī al-Ḥātimī. Ibn ‘Arabī, as I will refer to him, was an Andalusian scholar whose work spanned between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries during the period of Spanish Convivencia,<sup>38</sup> and who subsequently became known in Islam as a saint and pre-eminent doctor of the faith in the medieval era.

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<sup>37</sup> Goudarzi, Mohsen. 2023. “Unearthing Abraham’s Altar: The Cultic Dimensions of Dīn, Islām, and ḥanīf in the Qur’an.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 82 (1): 77–102. <https://doi.org/10.1086/723646>. 78.

<sup>38</sup> Wolf, Kenneth Baxter. “Convivencia in Medieval Spain: A Brief History of an Idea.” *Religion Compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 72–85. doi:10.1111/J.1749-8171.2008.00119.X. [https://www.academia.edu/85621186/Convivencia\\_in\\_Medieval\\_Spain\\_A\\_Brief\\_History\\_of\\_an\\_Idea](https://www.academia.edu/85621186/Convivencia_in_Medieval_Spain_A_Brief_History_of_an_Idea)

Ibn ‘Arabī is certainly a fascinating figure in many respects, and perhaps no one would agree with that assessment more than Ibn ‘Arabī himself. An inheritor of the wisdom of the Kubrawī school of Sufi learning, Ibn ‘Arabī was a prolific thinker and daring exegete who considered himself the greatest *‘ārif* (gnostic or possessor of special knowledge) of his age, referring to himself as the spiritual pole (*qutb*) of the universe. Despite this, Ibn ‘Arabī spoke of himself as acting as a mere mouthpiece for God and asserted that his revelations were in fact His revelations. Asserting his especial relationship with God and divine knowledge, Ibn ‘Arabī cited no other exegetical authority other than himself.<sup>39</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī often turned to poetry to explore the multi-layered, metaphysical truths he saw as being extrapolated on within the Qur’an itself (with his poetry sometimes taking on the cadence, rhyme, and meter of the Qur’an itself). His poetic approach particularly suits his intricate, mystical, monist doctrine of *wahdat ul-wujud*—Oneness of Being.<sup>40 41</sup>

This Oneness of Being is an attribute of God, and I believe it is best explored at an angle rather than through direct attempts at definition. It is best to consider an example of Ibn ‘Arabī’s rather bold exegetical style that illustrates the richness of *Wahdat ul-Wujud*. One exceptional example comes from Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Bezels of Wisdom*, a synoptic text written in the last years of his life intended to distill his life’s work into one short volume. In the twenty-fourth section of

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<sup>39</sup> Knysh, Alexander, 'Sufi Commentary: Formative and Later Periods', in Mustafa Shah, and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, Oxford Handbooks (2020; online edn, Oxford Academic, 8 June 2020), <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.013.4>.

<sup>40</sup> Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society. 2020. “P | a | Aladdin: Oneness of Being (Wahdat Al-wujud) - Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society.” Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society - the Society Promotes a Greater Understanding of the Work of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) and His Followers. January 14, 2020. <https://ibnarabisociety.org/oneness-of-being-wahdat-al-wujud-aladdin-bakri/>.

<sup>41</sup> *Wahdat ul-wujud* was not a term employed by Ibn ‘Arabī himself and appeared around a century after his death as a term meant to critique Ibn ‘Arabī’s theology. His followers initially opted to describe their position as *waḥdat al-shuhūd*—Oneness of Witnessing—before eventually reclaiming the term *wahdat ul-wujud*.

this text, *The Wisdom of Leadership in the Word of Aaron*, Ibn ‘Arabī tackles the quintessential story of idolatry, the Golden Calf of Exodus 32. But he does so from a rather distinct vantage.

In considering the moment where Moses’ brother Aaron proves incapable (even unwilling) to prevent the seemingly idolatrous worship of the Golden Calf by the people of Israel during Moses’ lengthy sixth journey up Mount Sinai, Ibn ‘Arabī writes,

*Aaron’s lack of effective power to restrain the followers of the calf by gaining mastery over it, as Moses did, is a wisdom from God made manifest in the created world, so that He might be worshiped in every form... Nothing in the Cosmos is worshiped, however, except it assume for the worshiper a certain sublimity and enjoy a certain degree in his heart. Thus God is called the Lofty in degrees, and not lofty in degree, since He has made many degrees in One Essence.*<sup>42</sup>

Though Ibn ‘Arabī has much more to say about this episode, in this short quote he makes several crucial claims. First, in a counter-reading to the standard exegesis of the Golden Calf story, Ibn ‘Arabī makes the assertion that the worship of the Golden Calf was an act directly permitted—even ordained by—the very God that had recently made a direct admonition against idolatry. The fact that Aaron did not intercede and successfully prevent the worship of the Calf by the Israelites is in fact a “wisdom of God made manifest”. This wisdom, specifically, is the fact that God can “be worshiped in every form”, even through the form of idols.

But Ibn ‘Arabī’s take on the Golden Calf goes further. He insists that nothing in the Cosmos can be worshipped unless it takes on a “degree” of some sort—a sublimity and heart-

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<sup>42</sup> Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Arabī al-Ṭā’ī al-Ḥātimī. *The Wisdom of Leadership in the Word of Aaron*. In *The Bezels of Wisdom*. Trans. Austin, R. W. J. 1980. New York: Paulist Press. 246.

presence that signifies the occurrence or substance of the divine in that object of worship. To Ibn ‘Arabī, there is no possible worship except the worship of God. To worship, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is to recognize God in one of His many forms. When Ibn ‘Arabī insists that God is lofty in *degrees* (plural) versus in *degree* (singular), he is professing that he recognizes God as great in His omnipresence throughout all forms (all degrees) in our Universe rather than being great due to His separation from, and placement over, our Universe (highest degree). God is not only immanent, but immanent to the extent that nothing in the Universe is incapable of serving as an access point to holiness.

The concept of a God who permits idolatry is found, somewhat modified, in the later work of Nūr ad-Dīn ‘Abd ar-Rahmān Jāmī, often referred to by his penname, Jami. Jami was an extremely widely read and celebrated Iranian poet of the 15<sup>th</sup> century who was part of the same Sufi school to which Ibn ‘Arabī had belonged. Of his corpus, the romance of *Yusuf and Zulaikha* achieved possibly the greatest degree of success and was read in courts across the vast landscape of the medieval Islamic world. The tale of *Yusuf and Zulaikha* remains relevant to this day and enjoys impressive staying power for 600-year-old poem. An Iranian television show that hews closely to the plot of *Yusuf and Zulaikha* premiered in 2008, and views of the show’s pilot on YouTube have reached nearly one million views as of 2023).<sup>43</sup>

Non-Muslim Western readers may be aware that Yusuf is another name for the prophet Joseph, familiar to many from his antics and exploits in the last thirteen chapters of Genesis. Yusuf appears numerous times in the Qur’an, at greatest length in the eponymous Sura of Yusuf, Sura 12. Zulaikha, though, is a figure that Western Non-Muslims will most likely not recognize

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<sup>43</sup> Salam Media, English. 2022. “Prophet Joseph | English | Episode 01.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ue029tcgC6M>.

by name. In Genesis, she is referred to only as Potiphar's wife, and her namelessness is reinforced by her presentation in the narrative where she serves solely as sinful foil to Joseph's righteousness, and an opportunity to showcase his virtues.

*Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me! But he refused... And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her."<sup>44</sup>*

Subsequently, following repeated rejection, she acts as a plot device to have Joseph imprisoned by Potiphar. One day, Potiphar's wife rips Joseph's cloak as he flees from her sexual advances and she uses the telltale piece of fabric to falsely incriminate Joseph to her husband.

*When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined."<sup>45</sup>*

In the Qur'an, there are some minor differences to the tale. For one thing, Potiphar is later clarified as having recognized Yusuf's innocence rather than believe his conniving wife but is pressed to imprison Yusuf regardless to save face.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, Potiphar's wife is referred to by name—Zulaikha—and receives some more screentime as it were with an additional scene where she convinces the ladies of the Egyptian court that she is not mad for lusting after her husband's slave by presenting Yusuf in all his beauty to them. Stunned by the impressive young man, the

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<sup>44</sup> Genesis 39:6b-10 (edited).

<sup>45</sup> Genesis:19-20.

<sup>46</sup> Qur'an 12:28 and 32.

distracted women in attendance accidentally slice open their hands with the knives they had been using while dining.<sup>47</sup>

It was not until Jami penned *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, some 900 years after the revelation of the Qur'an, that Zulaikha truly comes into her own as a character with wants, hopes, fears, sorrows, and all the imperfections that make us human. In Jami's poem, Zulaikha's story begins far before she bursts into Yusuf's life with cloak-ripping intentions. As a young woman, she meets Yusuf in her dreams. Zulaikha falls completely in love with him and learns that this is the man whom she is destined to marry. However, her father sends Zulaikha to Egypt and promises her in marriage to the vizier. To Zulaikha's horror, she looks upon the vizier through a hole in the wall and discovers that he is not the man from her dreams. It is not Yusuf she spies at all--merely Potiphar. Her sorrow and yearning only deepens when Yusuf enters her life, years later, as the unattainable, uninterested slave of her husband.

Following her husband's death, Zulaikha loses her fortune, her beauty, and her youth. Now despondent and with nothing to her name, she appears to Yusuf and reveals her identity noting that there is no way that Yusuf would want anything to do with a woman like her. To her surprise, Yusuf is smitten by her tale and takes her in his arms. Her beauty and youth are restored, and the two consummate their marriage (in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century English translation by a British officer, this saucy section is replaced with the note *Thirty-two couplets, up to the end of the chapter, are here omitted as unsuited to European ideas.*)<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Qur'an 12:31.

<sup>48</sup> Nūr ad-Dīn 'Abd ar-Rahmān Jāmī. *Yūsuf and Zulaikha: a Poem*. Trans. Griffith, Ralph T. H. 1882. London: Trübner. 208.

But something significant happens in the moments leading up to Yusuf's recognition of Zulaikha and his acceptance of her love. Zulaikha loses her wealth, health, and physical attractiveness, yes, but there is one further aspect of self that she relinquishes that allows for her prophetic love to finally come to fruition: Zulaikha shatters the idols she had previously worshipped.

But the theological message that Jami weaves into Zulaikha's story is more complex than simply castigating idol worship in favor of monotheism.

*She broke the idol in her active mood,  
And in good order thence her matters stood.  
And when in breaking she had done her part,  
With tears and blood she purified her heart.  
Upon the ground she humbly rubbed her face,  
And wept and wailed before the throne of Grace.  
"O, thou with love who dost the wretched view,  
Idols, their worshippers and makers, too,  
Did not the image Thy own face reflect,  
Who to an idol would e'er show respect?  
With love dost thou the idol maker move,  
And thus his idol carving doth approve.  
Before an idol he who falls in prayer  
Will say in the idol God is there.*

*O God, to idols when I turn my face,  
'Tis on myself, O God, I bring disgrace.*<sup>49</sup>

Zulaikha's attitude is more complex than simple disdain for the idolatry she discards. Certainly, Zulaikha experiences deep shame, even self-revulsion, at the fact that she worshipped idols rather than directing her worship to God, however, this despondency is coupled with the recognition that it was in fact God's face that was reflected in the idols that Zulaikha once worshipped. And, furthermore, she exclaims that God recognizes and looks upon idol worshippers and idol makers with love, understanding, and even permission. It is God's love that acts as the motive force behind the idol maker's actions of creating the idol in the first place.

Jami's work here, in addition to penning a gorgeous love poem that gives depth and meaning to Yusuf and Zulaikha's shared story, is to bring further nuance to the theological work begun by Ibn 'Arabī. Like Ibn 'Arabī, Jami asserts that to worship idols is in fact worship God, albeit at an angle or as though through a fogged-up window pane. Jami takes Ibn 'Arabī's framework but complicates it with the idea that worshipping God through idols is indeed possible, even permissible, but that true reverence requires one to take a step beyond the idol itself to recognize the reality and ultimacy of God. To be idolatrous is to worship the idol in and of itself and to fail to appreciate the idol as a degree of God and a way we as mere humans can begin to understand God itself.

In considering the extreme import these scholars place upon montheistic presentations of the divine, I want to hearken back to the Pagan backlash against Rabbi Wolpe's article. For both Ibn 'Arabī and Jami, a strictly monotheistic view of God was paramount to any theological claim

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 201.

they made. In their treatment of idolatry, there was a great deal of nuance that allows for God to appear in infinite ways but the assertion that there is but one singular God behind each of these moments and embers of holiness is steadfast. In the response to Rabbi Wolpe's article, which makes a call for monotheism as a potential remedy for social ills, we must recognize that there are countless voices out there who are asking us to consider the following question: is monotheism truly so important?

In considering what Ibn 'Arabī and Jami offer us, I want to diverge from their insistence on the primacy of exclusive monotheism in favor of leaving open more ways to perceive the holy. It does not seem necessary to me to arbitrate between understanding God as the ultimate source of worship represented and refracted in a multiplicity of forms versus seeing a multiplicity of Gods. On the one hand, we perceive an infinitely sided crystal, on the other, that crystal is shattered into countless, glittering shards. Either way, nothing is lost. As far as I am concerned, one's perception lies in whether they wish to focus on the beautiful diversity of the many different manifestations of goodness or the unity of goodness that lies between and behind those refractions. What is important is that no matter how we seek it and how we see it, we stay committed to the never-ending journey towards a better, happier, and more just world. I cannot imagine that God, or the Gods, would ask for anything other than this.

# Icons and Incarnation

Let us take a step back even further in time, before Jami and before Ibn ‘Arabī, to the Christian world of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the Eastern Roman world was split in two—rocked by back-and-forth arguments and violence over a question concerning idolatry: can images be used to worship God?

Beginning in 726 CE with the Eastern Roman Emperor Leo III’s order to destroy all icons—religious images—throughout the empire, the conflict between iconoclasts and those who argued on behalf of the use of icons would rage for over a century. With brief moments of remission in 786 and 815, the iconoclastic argument held sway and icons—frescos, paintings, sculptures, and more—were obliterated in the name of combatting the heresy of idolatry. The reign of iconoclasm came to a close in 843 CE when the use of icons was declared to be in line with Church teachings in an event known as the “Triumph of Orthodoxy” that is still celebrated annually in the Orthodox Church on the First Sunday of Lent.<sup>50</sup>

During this century of tension and unrest, one thinker from the outskirts of Eastern Roman rule offered what would become one of the most distinguished defenses of icon usage. This man, John of Damascus, produced three treatises between the years of 726 and 750 CE (although the precise dates of these works has not been completely nailed down). These treatises, collectively known as the *Three Treatises on the Divine Image*, are written against, “those who would attack the holy images”, delivering a robust, passionate, and erudite defense of icons not only as compatible with Christian orthodoxy, but as necessary for the cultivation of a

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<sup>50</sup> St. John of Damascus. 7.

relationship with the sacred.<sup>51</sup> Though John employs the language of “icons” rather than “idols”, his viewpoints provide a new angle for us to continue our analysis of idolatry.

John’s ability to critique the iconoclastic fervor that had gripped the royal court of Constantinople is in part due to his liminal positionality. The man who would become canonized and venerated as St. John of Damascus was born not with the name John, but the Arabic name Mansur. John, née Mansur, lived his entire life outside the geography of the Eastern Roman Empire. He first worked in the administration of the Umayyad caliphate in its capital of Damascus, before leaving around 706 CE to become a monk in the vicinity of Jerusalem. John presents himself in his treatises as under the auspices of the Eastern Roman world—which in many ways he certainly was—but his distance from the empire allowed John a degree of safety that his contemporaries did not enjoy in attacking the imperially approved doctrine of iconoclasm.<sup>52</sup>

John’s argument is multipronged, and ranges from subtle arguments about different kinds of veneration (or bowing down)<sup>53</sup> to the assertion that the Bible is replete with God-approved icons that grant a basis for legitimate use of icons in worship. For John, the Ark of the Covenant depicting cherubim is presented as a necessary icon that uses something within creation (for cherubim, like all things in John’s framework, are created by God) to aid in the act of imagining, understanding, and ultimately worshipping a God who is “circumscribable and unimaginable”—

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 7-8.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 25-26. John differentiates veneration that accompanies worship and is thus appropriate only for God in opposition to veneration that is “offered in honor to those who excel on account of something worthy”—the latter of which is exemplified by Jacob’s veneration (but not worship) of his brother Esau and Joshua’s veneration (but not worship) of an angel.

a formlessness that cannot be given form except in analogy through iconography.<sup>54</sup> Joining the Ark, John goes further and suggests that Biblical Law itself—the very place we find the admonition against idolatry—is an image just as icons are. As evidence, John quotes a passage from Hebrews which asserts that the law is a “shadow of good things to come” rather than being “the image of the realities” in and of itself.<sup>55</sup> “The image”, writes John, “is memorial.”<sup>56</sup>

Idols, for John, are those images and objects that point us *away* from God. Icons, though, bring us *towards* God. This is a marked distinction from the perspective of the Sufi theologians Ibn ‘Arabī and Jami for whom any worship is definitionally worship directed towards God. Ibn ‘Arabī holds that God, as lofty in degrees, is fully approachable in any and all objects. Jami agrees to a certain extent but presents a hierarchy where idols are indeed ordained by God as a means of worship, but there are perhaps some idols that are better than others and ultimately all idols pale in comparison to directly worshipping God without recourse to idols. John, however, condenses things further into a cleaner binary of idols and icons. Icons are good and holy and necessary; idols are bad and anathema and must be avoided. John’s labor is the work of justifying the category “icon” as extent and discrete from the category of “idol”.

Of these arguments, there are elements of each that add dimension to the defense of idolatry developed in this section. Like Ibn ‘Arabī, I view access to God, indeed even God itself, as eternally present, accessible, and worshipable in all things real and unreal in the form of goodness. Like Jami, I believe it to be important to notice and identify the underlying unity that

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 29. Here I wish to note that the Book of Hebrews, in its treatment of the Law as found in the Hebrew Bible, has been read and continues to be read in supersessionist ways that denigrate Jewish practices. I believe that John’s argument that the law can be understood as an image is valuable, but I do not want to gloss over the fact that the text he uses to support this position is one that has been traditionally employed in harmful ways against Jews.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 31.

allows idols to be access points for a greater, often harder to reach, divinity (I perceive this divinity to be pure goodness). From John's argument, though, I receive something else. From here, I have an opportunity to appreciate how we as humans can participate in holiness.

The crux of John's argument is the role Jesus of Nazareth plays in his consideration of icons. At this juncture, we will see an obvious and sharp divergence from the previous Islamic viewpoints we examined in a previous section.

*Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never depicted, but now that God has been seen in the flesh and associated with humankind, I depict what I have seen of God. I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter who became matter for my sake... Therefore I reverence the rest of matter and hold in respect that through which my salvation came, because it is filled with divine energy and grace. Is not the thrice-precious and thrice-blessed wood of the cross matter?... Is not the ink and the all-holy book of the Gospels matter? Is not the life-bearing table, which offers to us the bread of life, matter? Is not the gold and silver matter, out of which crosses and tablets and bowls are fashioned? And, before all these things, is not the body and blood of my Lord matter?*<sup>57</sup>

For John, the Incarnation of God as the flesh-and-blood man, Jesus, changes the equation radically. It is through God's decision to clad Godself in matter—in human flesh, no less—that matter becomes “filled with divine energy and grace”. Not only can matter (in the form of idols) point us towards God, but the Incarnation as an event leads St. John of Damascus to the conclusion that matter itself can be infused with divinity. Thus, in addition to being valuable

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 29-30.

as a “loudly sounding herald” that leads us to God, matter can be a part of God or vice-versa.

John likens holy matter, such as saints, to iron plunged into a fire. The iron becomes red-hot and thus becomes one with the fire not in nature (for it is still iron and not fire), but in participation. Matter, then, can become deified by participating in holiness, and it is God who has allowed for this passageway by having voluntarily participated in corporeality.<sup>58</sup>

Jesus, then, becomes the keystone for John’s arguments on behalf of iconography. Jesus as the Incarnation of God is crucial to how John understands not only God, but humanity. John’s argument relies on Jesus not just as a profoundly holy person, but as uniquely God. Through the unparalleled gift from God to humanity in the Incarnation, matter becomes sanctifiable and thus in the form of icons it “gives form to simplicity that is beyond nature and shape in a multitude of separate symbols”.<sup>59</sup>

At this point in our journey together, I wonder if it will surprise you—or not—that I do not know whether I can, should, or want to call myself a Christian. By now, I imagine it is clear to you that my understanding of God and of theology writ large is massively informed by Christianity (indeed, even my use of the term “theology” is rather Christian). I was certainly raised in the culturally Christian environment of wealthy suburban Massachusetts, and the way I talk about God, and most of the thinkers I draw upon, are largely Christian. Though I did not identify myself as one at the outset, a reader would certainly be forgiven and understood if they engaged in this work assuming that I was definitively a Christian of one flavor or another.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 32-33.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 40.

And yet, though I imagine many non-Christians might be satisfied at this juncture to allow me classification as a Christian, I also believe that most Christians would be hesitant at best to adhere such a title to me. Or, more likely, they would scoff at the very idea of me being a Christian. After all, it is only just now in this work we do together that I am bringing Jesus into view, and I do so with no small amount of trepidation and uncertainty.

On the one hand, I do find that articulating Jesus as God can be, in many ways, personally compelling. Especially considering St. John's arguments above. Understanding Jesus as God, as John points out, does something wonderful—it calls us to see God as a flesh-and-blood human, and thus demands that we appreciate humanity as worthy of holiness. Messy, sinning, shortsighted humans are beautiful, worthy, and wonderful enough to not only connect with God—but to *be* a part of God. The relationship between Jesus and God as unified but separate, discrete yet swirling together like the Atlantic and the Pacific, demonstrates an otherwise otherworldly God's proximity to humanity. When we understand Jesus as an invitation to behold humanity and the physical world as fully sacred and completely suffused with holiness, I am drawn in. When Jesus calls God *abba*, I feel a surge of love.

But on the other hand, I also feel a certain distance. An alienation that keeps me from feeling as though I can unequivocally accept Jesus as God in the way that is generally taught by Christians of most stripes. This alienation, for me, is borne out of Jesus' unique relationship to God as God's *only* Son. We might all be children of God, but Jesus' Sonship and Oneness with God is taught as incomparable. The relationship between Father and Son is aspirational, perhaps, but completely beyond the scope of a normal human life.

Should this be the case, then it seems to me that the Incarnation becomes less about exploring and celebrating the holiness of humanity, and more of a single moment of God's

presence on the Earth that must be analyzed and replicated to the best of our abilities. John's arguments about the potential sanctity of matter and humanity still hold, but only insofar as matter and humans can voluntarily participate in holiness. And how is that done? Necessarily by following the example of pure goodness—God—as it appeared once upon a time in human form.

For me, the compatibility of being fully human and fully divine only makes sense when we consider the full spectrum of humanity as what it means to be fully human. This unity then takes the form of an awesome and paradoxical interweaving of the messiness and complexity of being a human in this bizarre and meaningless world with the unfathomable, gorgeous simplicity of God as goodness. This intermingling of humanity and God seems to fall apart when the fullness of what it means to be human becomes restricted to the individual life of one person—no matter who that person is. And to be certain, Jesus is no ordinary fellow. Jesus is holy inversion. Jesus is divine disruption. Jesus is the king who died ignominiously on a wooden cross. Jesus is the teacher who scoffed at the learned, and the Lord who lived amongst the downtrodden.

But Jesus was still a person. He is, as the general agreement goes, *fully human* no matter what else he is. And to be human is to screw up. That's what we do. I think it is part of our charm. Though many would consider such a claim to be wildly incorrect, I assert that Jesus was—by virtue of being human—not perfect. By way of example, I see this all-too-human imperfection on full display in a certain episode from the Gospels. One which gives me pause. It is an anecdote from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus offers us a look at his own interpretation of his mission:

*Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”*

*Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”*

*He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”*

*The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.*

*He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”*

*“Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”*

*Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.<sup>60</sup>*

Here, Jesus is approached by a woman in dire need of the healing that Jesus has proven himself capable of. Not for her own life, but for the sake of her daughter, the Canaanite woman begs for Jesus to come and perform an exorcism. Crying out, this stranger throws herself at the feet of a man from a different culture and begs him to help her.

And Jesus ignores her. His disciples ask him to send her away, but Jesus responds that he will not condescend to even expel her from his presence. Jesus insists that his work, his God-

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<sup>60</sup> Matthew 15:21-28.

ordained work, is on the behalf only of the lost sheep of Israel. This Canaanite woman—this *foreigner*—is beyond not only the auspices of his care but even of his attention.

Jesus might have dismissed her, but this mother will not relent so easily. Spurred on by the thoughts of her daughter, afflicted and desperate, the woman runs after the departing holy man and kneels in front of his path to beseech him, with extreme humility, once more for aid. She places her body before Jesus and forces him to consider her.

And he does. Jesus responds to the woman's request and denies her, stating that, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

Now, like with any scriptural passage, it is entirely possible to exegete this story in a way that maintains Jesus' perceived perfection. Maybe he is merely pretending to dismiss this woman as a test? It is hard, though, to minimize the fact that Jesus is bluntly casting this woman aside on the basis of race regardless of what was going through his head. And at the end of the day, I think any attempt to exculpate Jesus comes at the cost of sidelining the bravery, selflessness, and resilience of the Canaanite woman who merely becomes a teaching tool—a chess piece that was moved the correct number of spaces on the correct turn of an esoteric game of Godly chess.

When I read this passage, I cannot help but ask: this is God? God tells a crying woman that she is a dog, unworthy of God's time and healing by virtue of her race and the circumstances of her birth? I find myself back on that archery field where my friend Aaron asked me to think about a God that would consign a child to hell for not having been born into a religious household.

To be fair, the story does end with Jesus recognizing, in part, his mistake and agreeing to heal the Canaanite woman's daughter. But he does so only after the woman—in extreme humility, desperation, or both—confirms that she is a dog compared to the children of Israel but still deserving and desiring of their scraps. Here we see on display the fully human faculties of knee-jerk sectarianism, reconciliation, growth, and the lengths to which we will go to help those we love. I see God not only in Jesus, but even more brightly within the Canaanite woman. I cannot help but do so.

So long as Jesus' divinity is seen as extending the possibility of holiness to the fullness of humanity, his imperfections are a feature rather than a bug. When Jesus lashes out at the money lenders in the Temple, we see our own anger as a source of strength that can bring us closer to God. When Jesus experiences doubt and fear in the garden before his crucifixion, we see that doubt is just another facet of faith. When we celebrate Jesus as divine because of his imperfections rather than despite them or by ignoring their existence, we recognize in him the truth that all beings are essential, sacred, worthy, and—yes—imperfect.

When we give shape to God, that decision cuts both ways. We give shape to divinity, and we divinize the shape. For instance, when we say, "God is a woman", we perform two separate actions. On the one hand, we illuminate God. We give a new and comprehensible dimension to that which is simple beyond our comprehension—we see how goodness can and does take feminine form in this world. And at the same time, we divinize women and demand attention to the holiness inherent in womanhood. The same thing can occur when we say, "God is disabled." Again, we see goodness in a new light. Perhaps we understand it, as we might understand disabled persons in our society, as profoundly strong and perseverant despite oppression and erasure at the hands of ubiquitous-yet-nefarious social structures. At the same time, such a claim

asks us to perceive disability as divine and so forces us to ask how our understanding and treatment of disability as a society thus falls short.

Something similar occurs when we correlate Jesus with God. We illustrate God in new ways by casting the projection of Jesus onto the divine. We see how goodness itself is expressed in human form; how holiness burns hotly and powerfully in those who resolve to stand up to oppressive regimes in a spirit of loving kindness; and how sacred power is invested in the meek. Simultaneously, though, in addition to granting new shape to God in the form of Jesus, we divinize Jesus. In my view, this is good in that it helps us see the blinding luminance of the divine spark within a single human being. But it also can become potentially harmful if we allow Jesus to be uniquely divinized in this way, thereby categorizing every single event and aspect of Jesus' life and ministry, even his prejudice and his mistakes, as that which is holiest in the high. Rather than saying that all that is good in Jesus is divine and points us to the sacred, we say that all that is Jesus is good and we need look no further for other avenues of illumination for that great mystery of God. If we divinize Jesus—but not humanity at large—then Jesus and his actions occupy a position of holiness unshared by the Canaanite woman and her actions.

Exclusivist representations of God can and do have consequences. In the 1970s feminist theologian Mary Daly argued that implicit and unchallenged conceptions of God as male serve as a widespread yet subtle buttressing for malignant structures of patriarchy that legitimate the subjugation of women. “If God in ‘his’ heaven is a father ruling ‘his’ people, then it is the ‘nature’ of things and according to the divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male dominated... [A] mystification of roles takes place: the husband dominating his wife

represents God himself.”<sup>61</sup> This reification and deification of masculine dominance as “natural” and even divinely ordained is only possible through the suppression of alternative images of God. Hence, the widespread weaponization of idolatry throughout history that has allowed for the uncontested ubiquity of God as eternally and unwaveringly male.

The work we have done in previous chapters in a closer examination of idolatry seeks to flip this paradigm on its head. Idolatry, ethically understood, ought not to be used in the service of designating a singular view of divinity. Instead, the idea of idolatry can be employed to prevent that very thing from occurring by insisting that God is too wonderful and too holy to be constrained by only one set of images or one angle of perspectives.

In her recent book, *Loving our Own Bones*, disability theologian Julia Watts Belser offers us the following,

*What I know is this: we need a way to speak more gently and more generously about the sacred, a way that gets us past the bludgeons and the bullhorns. So many of us have been taught to think of religion as a zero-sum game, where one truth triumphs and the rest is heresy or foolishness. I want a different kind of conversation, one that holds a space for curiosity, for holy playfulness. I approach theology not as a fixed set of propositions and unwavering claims but as a field of possibilities.*<sup>62</sup>

My hope is that our time together has been a walk through such a field. I wholeheartedly believe in Belser’s view of a new kind of conversation, and I think having those conversations

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<sup>61</sup> Daly, Mar. *After the death of god the father*. In *Womanspirit Rising: a Feminist Reader in Religion*. Christ, Carol P., and Judith Plaskow. 1992. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco. 54.

<sup>62</sup> Belser, Julia Watts. 2023. *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole*. Boston: Beacon Press. 15.

with us, with God, and with each other in small moments of connection is vastly important. All theologies are images, and they tell us as much about the theologians trying to create them as they do about the God they purport to illustrate.

What I insist on is that in addition to changing the nature of religious conversation to a field of possibilities, we must also share those possibilities with one another. Two eyes are not enough to see God. Two hands are not enough to feel the infinite contours of goodness. No matter who we are—no matter our level of so-called expertise or number of years in this institution or in that movement—each relationship with God is sacred and priceless. It is my hope that we can move forward in cultivating a world where everyone's connection to and perception of the divine is treated as a treasure to be held with honor and shared widely with gratitude. Each and every millisecond of connection to the holy a gift that can only be offered as Grace, because it is an offering that has no equal and requires no recompense other than an open mind and an open heart.

When I sit with patients as they work through questions of God, meaning, and suffering, it is a moment of connection. But it is also a moment of disruption. My own longstanding beliefs about what is true and what is right are jostled, shaken, or even shattered as I am invited to share in the experience of meeting the divine through another person's relationship with God. Connection and disruption work in tandem and together they become revelation—the means through which God comes into view.

Sometimes this understanding arrives faintly, like the sun rising behind a veil of mist. And sometimes God comes crashing through, like high beams cutting through the night on a quiet country road. No matter how it occurs, every time we come into contact with someone else's view of God we leave that experience transformed.

## **Section III**

# **The Soul of Goodness**

# A Lens

I would like for you to—just for a moment—put yourself in a room. A clean, white room, perhaps with some flowers or balloons in the corner, looking out the window at a lovely expanse of forest. By your side, lying in bed, is a perfect stranger. Someone who is suffering and who is in pain. And they ask you, perhaps with tears in their eyes, perhaps with suspicion, or perhaps quite plainly, “why would God let this happen to me?”

How might you respond?

In my first foray into hospital-based ministry, I worked at St. Josephs, a trauma II hospital in Tacoma, WA. I was a Clinical Pastoral Education intern. Essentially, what that means is that this was my first stint working in a clinical setting. I had some small ministerial experience under my belt from parish work, as well as two years of divinity schoolwork towards an MDiv degree, but the bulk of chaplaincy work is learned on the job. As such, I was acutely aware of the fact that when I was in the room with patients, I walked a very peculiar line as someone whose badge identified them simultaneously as a figure of spiritual authority as well as an intern. All of this is to say that if the idea of responding in the moment to someone dying asking you if their suffering is divinely ordained and gilded with holy, if uncertain, meaning makes you uneasy, you are not alone.

In those moments, I would pause. I would take a moment to sit and be with the person who asked me that question. And then, after being together in the quiet, I would tell them, “I don’t know.”

To my initial surprise, that “I don’t know” was almost always met with a smile. More than once, the person with whom I was sitting would tell me that this was the only answer they’d heard so far that made any sense to them.

However, my non-answer did not mark the end of wrestling with the question. During my time at St. Joe’s, I had the profound blessing of more teachers than I can possibly count. My supervisor, the staff chaplains, my other CPE intern colleagues, as well as the nursing staff and other hospital workers, all taught me more than I can put words to. But, on top of all of that, the patients and families I met with and had the opportunity to spend time with, share stories with, and just be together with, taught me more about God, life, death, humanity, happiness, grief, and loss than I would have thought possible. Each patient—from those who passed peacefully, surrounded by family, to those who struggled in fear and pain, to those who speedily recuperated and left the hospital—showed me what it is to live and to strive for meaning. They taught me about the divine—whatever form it took for them—and how to live find comfort in the holy, as well as how to wrestle with God when life becomes full of doubt. And they taught me that no matter how much I think I know, I don’t really know very much at all.

When patients asked me about the possible meaning their suffering might have, I do not doubt that they expected some kind of answer from me. The relief I saw when I told them that I did not have an answer was sometimes mixed with genuine regret that I was unable to provide certainty and direction. But that question was never mine to answer. Simply voicing that question aloud to me was enough to start a journey of discovery for many of these patients. My inability to provide incontrovertible truth only clarified that grappling with these questions of meaning and God were as important to their healing as the medicine and rest that had already

been prescribed. Of all the patients that asked me this question and subsequently struggled to discover their own answers, no two journeys looked the same.

We are more than stories. When looking at the beautiful messiness of a human life, there is no such thing as a complete narrative. Nor should there be. Each person I have met with inside (and outside) the hospital is a vast, messy web of moments, emotions, memories, relationships, and thoughts that all add up and weave together to form the bubbling, fluctuating, amorphous thing that is them. In visiting with others as they wrestle and struggle with God, I have seen that each time we revisit God and ourselves, we find new hidden places to sit in, and odd new pieces to build with.

One patient joked with me that anyone who claimed to have authoritative knowledge on what God is or wants is either “a fool or trying to sell you something.” And, because I am steadfastly certain that I am not trying to sell you something, I must be a fool. A fool for having spent these nearly one hundred pages trying to tell you about something I cannot possibly tell you about.

And so, in this last section, I want to introduce a lens. Just a lens, nothing more. In the next section, I will present a way to view the universe and whatever lies beyond it. In the section thereafter, I will use this lens to offer a conclusion that considers the work we have already done but allows me to end on a note of not-knowing. A place where I might leave more room for God.

# Body, Spirit, Soul

Cast your mind to a mountaintop. You have spent the better part of the afternoon hiking to this spot. It is wooded, shady; and as you reach the summit you look out over the forest below that you have spent your day climbing through to get where you are now. You came up this mountain alone, and you carry the memory of your hike with you. Perhaps on your journey you saw a deer, picked up a shiny stone, stopped for a drink of cool water.

And now you are at the top, looking out over the forest where many others have hiked before to reach that mountaintop upon which you are standing. By your feet, at the very summit, is a cairn. An intentional pile of stones, each one left by a previous hiker creating that wonderful drip-castle shape that stacked stones tend to take on. You remember your hike—all the moments that compose that trek—and you place your rock on top of the pile.

That cairn, like everything else we interact with, is a spirit.

Now what does that mean? It means that the cairn is much more than the pile of rocks that you helped to build. That pile of rocks is merely the physical anchor, the body that serves as a vessel for the spirit of that cairn. The material part—the body—is merely an assemblage of stones, and those stones themselves are assemblages of smaller components down to the microscopic level. From our vantage outside of the cairn, there is nothing that we can perceive as inherent to the cairn's body/physical anchor that distinguishes the cairn as an entity that stands alone and has a specific identity. That identity, that is the cairn itself, is immaterial. It is a spirit.

Each hiker that visited this mountain added a stone to the cairn and responded to it as a real entity rather than as a meaningless assemblage. In doing so, they were animating the

cairn—that is they were perceiving the cairn as a real thing that could be interacted with. By animating that cairn, which is something we do automatically and continually to everything we consider, that cairn took on an identity informed by the hiker who animated it. It took on characteristics of that hiker’s memories of their hike, of their previous relationships to similar landmarks, and the characteristics of the hiker themselves, all while remaining an entity at least partially distinct from that hiker.

What is helpful about the hypothetical of the cairn is that each hiker was interacting with a slightly different version of this cairn. On an obvious level, the hiker before you interacted with a cairn whose physical body may have consisted of twelve stacked stones whereas you met the cairn when its body was composed of thirteen. On a less obvious level, each of you brought different connotations and stories to this cairn and so the cairn’s spirit (that is, the cairn itself) may be perceived quite differently by you and the hiker before you. Perhaps after your peaceful hike, you perceive the cairn’s spirit to be one defined primarily by tranquility, but to a hiker who made this trek through a blizzard it is a spirit of triumph through adversity.

I choose the term “animating”—essentially “to ensoul”—carefully. In addition to highlighting the role soul plays in the process (which I will elaborate on shortly), the term additionally recognizes the preexistence of the spirit prior to one’s interaction with it, thus avoiding the implication that spirits are “created” at the moment of animation. To use language of creation that implies that these immaterial spirits are wholly formed by our thoughts. I perceive the act of interacting with spirits to be more nuanced than that model allows for; the process is less one-sided than an act of immediate generation.

Consider the spirit of the cairn in the hypothetical we have been working with. Are you and the hiker before you interacting with different cairns? Not at all. Despite the differences in

how you animate the cairn's spirit, no matter how differently that spirit might manifest to you and to the other hiker, you are working with the same cairn—the same spirit. The true spirit of that cairn contains all possible permutations of how it could be animated by any onlooker at any time. It is an infinitely sided object that can only be partially perceived by each viewer. This dormant spirit is partially animated by every person who interacts, or communes, with it.

But what, exactly, is this act of animation that occurs every time we recognize an entity—whether that entity is a fork, a person, or an idea such as love or justice? To understand the process through which we animate spirits and anchor them to bodies, we must turn to the third element of the self: the soul.

The soul is the interior life. It is your consciousness, subconsciousness, memories, and experiences. The soul is the innermost experience of being alive and able to relate to the universe and the things that compose it. It is the soul which allows for spirit animation because the act of animating spirits is the act of projecting your soul—that is your internal life and lived experience—onto another entity. Glen Mazis, building on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, refers to this process as “plunging” into an object (whereas I use the term animate). Mazis writes, “[this] means that as embodied perceivers, we are “in” what we perceive in some way. We even have a “reverse” sense of how the world would be seen from the vantage point of what we enter in perception—how these things would look back at us—since “to look at an object is to inhabit it.”<sup>63</sup>

One might take umbrage with the idea that interpersonal interactions are constituted of mutually projected images. Isn't it sad and meaningless to live in a world populated by your

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<sup>63</sup> Mazis, Glen A. “Ecospirituality and the Blurred Boundaries of Humans, Animals, and Machines.” *Ecospirit*, Fordham University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823237593-008>. 132.

own projections? First, I must clarify what, exactly, is occurring when a spirit is animated. The spirit itself is not being projected when I interact with something—my soul enters into or onto the spirit which is already there.

Let us say we are sitting at a bonfire. The spirit of that bonfire is inherent to that bonfire—it does not need to be created by us. Instead, what we project are our souls onto the spirit that is already there, and it is the projection of souls which constitutes the animation of the Bonfire Spirit—an animation that might be different from each of our perspectives. Through empathetic reverse relationship, we become able to experience that bonfire as an emotive and feeling thing with hopes, needs, joys, and sorrows that we can then learn from and react to in order to be in right-relationship with the bonfire.

Rather than perceiving animation exclusively as a projecting or an aggressive casting of oneself onto a passive object, the animated spirit can be seen as a relationship or a mutuality between observer and observed, or between two observers. This is closer to the perspective put forward by Professor J. Lorand Matory, who described his work with “hyper-cathected objects” in a 2017 interview,

*My general approach is based upon the hypothesis that certain objects deeply embody relationships... For example, the goddess Yemayá, in Cuba, is invoked by the color combination of blue and clear. She is present in the ocean, in the duck, in the froth at the shoreline, in homosexual men, in ocean shells, in fish. She is a being that is constituted by a network of things and people who are connected to her and reproduce her being.*<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Brown, Khytie, and Adrian Hernandez-Acosta. 2017. “Our Distributed Selves: An Interview with Professor J. Lorand Matory.” *Transforming Anthropology* 25 (2): 163–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/traa.12103>.

By appreciating how we cast our souls into, or map ourselves onto, events, places, and things, we can reevaluate the secular, Western impulse to dismiss anthropomorphizing, while retaining certain ethical boundaries. By carefully differentiating spirit (an animated mapping of oneself onto an anchor in the material world) from soul (the internal life and lived experience of an entity), we impose important limitations on how far we allow ourselves to go when we speak on behalf of something other than ourselves. This is especially true when considering speaking on behalf of things that do not speak in the same manner as humans do, such as plants, animals, and the Earth itself. We also understand that it is possible that learning whether or not the Earth has a soul (an internal life and lived experience it can use to animate spirits), is potentially beyond human knowing.

Spirits, such as the Earth Spirit, are accessible and able to offer insight and opportunities for empathy to those who commune with them. A spirit is animated by the one who communes with it by a projection or of the perceiver's soul. A soul, however, is quite distinct from a spirit. A soul belongs completely to itself. A soul—the lived experience, mind, and memories that we possess—is ours alone and can only be shared interpersonally in very specific and special circumstances. This sharing is a process that must be worked at and cannot simply occur at will. Being able to experience someone (or perhaps even something) else's soul can only be accomplished through deep connection built on a longstanding relationship of trust.

Our soul is our conscious and unconscious mind. It is our lived experience that we use to animate spirits and interact with the world through an almost unconscious and regular process of empathetic projection. Your spirit is what is animated by others when they interact with you, and it contains the multitude of possible interpretations of your self that are or could be held by others. Your body is the material objects onto which your spirit can be anchored and that your

soul inhabits—it does not end within the confines of our skin, bones, and flesh, but extends outwards into the world through our interaction with it. Perhaps onto a memento that you have given a loved one.

The cairn example illustrates the fluid relationship between these elements. The body of the cairn was changed between each hiker, yet it was still the same cairn. Consider Plutarch's ship of Theseus which is rebuilt slowly, plank by plank, until all original components of the ship are gone; it only remains the ship of Theseus through the continuity of its spirit (and, perhaps, its soul). The spirit—that which makes this object perceivable to us as the Ship of Theseus—has a mutable relationship to the physical body that it is anchored to. These elements of body and spirit are constantly mutating. They flow in and out of each other, providing meanings and dimensions to one another that flicker and shift with each passing moment. The soul, too, exists in liquid relationship with bodies and spirits. Souls animate spirits and bodies with vitality and awareness; bodies materialize souls and spirits with tangible physical-shape; Spirits inspire and give identity and intangible meaning-shape to bodies and souls. Though the three are discretely describable, they are in reality inseparable and beyond intimately bound.

These three attributes of body, spirit, and soul melt and fade into each other. Bodies can become anchors for new spirits through the vicissitudes of time. As we interact with someone we love, over time the boundaries between experiencing their spirit and their soul begin to blur. What we define as our body, the container for our soul, expands and contracts as we live into and out of the world around us.

# Prayer

So, where does God come into all of this?

God, too, has body and spirit, and our work thus far has been one of trying to determine the contours of each. In the first section of this text, we worked towards a doctrine of God that sought to define God, provide characteristics of God's nature, and in some way make God comprehensible and containable. This is, of course, in many ways a very silly thing to try to do.

The spirit is the component of God that we seek to understand, worship, and celebrate. God's spirit, like any spirit, contains multitudes. It is an impossibly vast landscape with room for infinite relationships, possibilities, theologies, and contradictions. Anyone who interacts with God, speaks with God, cries out against God, writes theologies about God, animates the spirit of God, and infuses it with their own perspective, desire, assumptions, and characteristics. Millennia upon millennia of people interacting with the Ultimate Concern—whether they use the term “God” or not—have delved into truly innumerable places within, around, and through God's spirit.

This vastness, this overwhelming richness, is not merely a bulwark against understanding. It is a treasure. When we talk about needing other people's perspectives and sharing our experiences of the sacred together in community and across communities, this is why. No one of us can hold all of God in our hands, just as no one of us could hold, say, hold all the Earth's waters in our hands. God is not diminished when we share it, nor even is God lessened when we disagree and find deep distinctions in what we mean when we say the word

“God”. God always has more to offer us, which means that we always have more to offer each other.

If we had as many millennia as there have been breaths breathed upon this Earth, we could not begin to collate the myriad elements of God into one form comprehensible to a single mind. God’s spirit is an infinite chorus, not a single song. Equally innumerable are the physical manifestations of God—the refractions and manifestations of goodness as they appear here in our physical world. Patting a puppy, a beloved home, an unexpected appearance of a firefly on a dark and crisp night. All of these and many, many more, are God’s body.

In the second section of this text, we focused on idols and idolatry to learn more about where God is witnessed in our world, and how we learn about God from these manifestations. From at least the dawn of humanity, and perhaps before that, vessels for God have been witnessed and constructed in the form of sacred landmarks both natural (mountains, forests, oceans, etc.) and handmade (sanctuaries, shrines, vessels, etc.) But tangible bodies are not the only containers for God—God experiences embodiment in acts and events within this world. Miracles, whether mundane or supernatural, as well as moments where holiness becomes infused with reality. The birth of a child, a sea being split to allow an exodus to pass through, finding one’s glasses after searching desperately for them for nearly an hour. God’s embodiment is many-limbed. Some find God in cathedrals with the sun streaming through stained glass windows—beams dancing on motes of dust flickering lazily in the air. Some find God whispering from the tops of cloud-kissed mountain peaks. Some find God in the form of a man from Nazareth by way of Bethlehem. Some find God in a Grey Catbird nestled in a lightning-split tree within a quiet swamp.

God's spirit and God's bodies are profoundly polymorphic, but they are not amorphic. The varied aspects of God's spirit as well as the multifarious physical forms which God inhabits do not arise randomly. Though God looks different—sometimes unbelievably different—from person to person, tradition to tradition, day to day, there is something that binds God together. Something that unites, interweaves, and undergirds the many faces of God witnessed throughout time and place.

I believe that to be God's Soul.

God's bodies are visible with our eyes, and his spirit—animated by us and our own assumptions, quirks, and needs—exists halfway between us and the centermost, innermost part of God. God's body is here in this universe, and God's spirit lies somewhere out of its reach.

God's soul, though, belongs to God. And it is neither completely here nor completely there.

In this text, I have argued that this binding agent that defines God most deeply is goodness itself, but goodness is just a name. Goodness is merely just the title, attribute, and character that I apply to the core of God. Souls are not comprehensible, describable, or characterized in the same manner spirits are. I could write for as long as I like, but I will never be able to cerebrally approach, let alone describe for others, what the Soul of God *is*. The closest I can come is to say that the Soul of God is the Soul of Goodness.

The Soul belongs to itself. And yet, it is sharable. For most of our interactions, we interact with one another's spirits—demi-projections built on heuristics and assumptions. But not all interactions take this form. There are those with whom we are most comfortable. There

are people with whom we feel the projections, the personae, and the preconceptions fall away like dandelion seeds borne away by a gentle wind.

A connection like this is a mutual listening. A shared vulnerability that does not feel vulnerable at all. It is a moment where no one is telling themselves or another who they are: it is just two souls being. And being together.

When we seek this connection, this listening togetherness, with God, we call it prayer.

Sometimes in prayer, God comes to us glimmering at the edge of our understanding. Other times, God comes like a crashing tidal wave. Yet still other times—perhaps most times for some of us—God is completely silent.

A relationship between souls is one that takes time. Like any relationship, it is one that experiences forward momentum, sudden setbacks, and even loop-de-loops. It is organic, it is messy, it never feels complete, and it is beautifully imperfectly perfect.

In short, it is good.

# Conclusion

The simple and flawed theology developed in this text has little to say about how to save the world. It has little to say about how to discern who is right versus who is wrong. That is not what we have set out to accomplish. What this theology seeks to do is to send us not to the highest pulpits where we can try to course-correct the world, but instead it asks us to be uncertain. To hold our trust in divine goodness tightly and faithfully, while forever leaning into the unsolvable glory of the mystery of God. We hear the call to hold ourselves steady as we traverse ever-shifting sands on an unending, bending way towards something unreachable.

We do not locate God through intransigent commitment to our own assumptions and self-centering, nor can we do so through dismissal of how others understand God. The only way we can reliably get closer to the sacred is through disruption and through connection.

Disruption in those moments of humility and openness to learning and change. Disruption through listening—*really listening*—to what someone else tells you about their own experience and their own story. Disruption by not taking yourself too seriously, yet never wavering in the knowledge that you are uncontestably worthy, wonderful, and beloved. Disruption through knowing that the spirit and body of God must be forever sought through imperfect idols both our own and those belonging to others who are kind enough to share.

Connection in those intimate moments between people. Between loved ones, family, friends, and strangers. Or even a connection to that inextinguishable holiness within you, or between you and nature, during a quiet walk in the woods. Connection, however brief, however vibrant, however confusing, disorienting, and sublime with the soul of God.

To find God at all is to find God at the smallest scale, and to cherish those little sparks as they flicker into view. God is found in the spaces between, in the eternal now, and in the roaring silence. God is in those glittering embers of holiness, and they are an assurance that the possibility for goodness is always present in all things. From that little truth, we may begin to work slowly upward.

This is a theology of recentering and relocating what is divine and vital because to do so is an act of holy survival. It is only once we do the fingers-in-the-dirt work of finding sparks of divinity in our world that then can we build flickers, flames, and perhaps one day even bonfires of hope in an otherwise hopeless world.

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