CHAPTER 12: GOD: CONCEPTS AND IMAGES

“Lo, my eye has seen all this,
my ear has heard and understood it.”
“I will show you, hear me;
and what I have seen, I will declare.”
(Job 13:11, 15:17)

It is finally time to talk about God. This chapter will certainly not be an exhaustive statement of all that can be said about God, however. For one thing, that can’t be done in one chapter or even in one book. It can’t be done by any one individual. Probably as a whole species we will never fully understand God, much less as individuals.

For another thing, it is not the purpose of this chapter to give a complete statement about God. The purpose of this chapter is to set out a general framework of what we can say. We will first look at those aspects of reality which can serve to point to God (Where do we see God?). We will then ask how God acts (What does God do?), and briefly address some questions about the nature of God (What is God like?). Finally, in the last section we will shift from concepts to images as I briefly suggest some metaphors that may help us to understand God.

One further note of introduction: while it is appropriate to be cautious in making statements about God, we showed in the last chapter that it is not appropriate to limit ourselves to that which can be empirically or logically proven. So while we will not appeal to revelation, there are insights about God that have been developed through the ages, passed on by the great religions, and confirmed or maybe even originated in our

1While the approach taken in this chapter will speak of God being in the processes of this world, this is not “process theology” in a technical sense. Strictly speaking, “process thought” refers to philosophy or theology based on the ideas of Alfred North Whitehead. While process thought is congenial to my approach, I am not sure that I can subscribe to all of the claims it makes (such as those regarding purpose) and I see no advantage to exchanging Nicene jargon for Whiteheadian jargon (such as “concrecence” and “prehension” and “mental pole”).
own lives. (As Christians, of course, we are guided first and foremost by the witness of the Christ.) We can put forth these insights as statements about God so long as we can show that they fit with reality and with our common sense.

I. Where Do We See God?

Q: If we are going to look for God—what does God look like?
A: God doesn't "look like". God doesn't look like anything, in the sense that God could be said to have shape and size and color like most things around us. We cannot see God just as we cannot see the wind and cannot see love. Yet we can usually tell by looking outside whether there is any wind. If we cannot see what the wind "looks like" we can still tell, by looking or feeling, its strength and direction. And if we know what to look for we can see the presence of love.

Q: How, then, do you see God? Where can you point to God even in the same way that you see the wind?
A: Someone of the "specific interventionist" line of thought might point to a particular incident and say, "There! That was God's doing!" Perhaps this is the kind of evidence you want. We can, after all, point to a blown-down tree and say, "There, that was the wind's doing." However—besides being a bit suspicious about which events get credited to God—I simply cannot believe in a specific interventionist God. Our common sense does not allow it, nor does our faith (see Chapter 3). So it is inappropriate to ask us for specific interventionist type of evidence. This means we cannot point to God by means of an incident here or there which somehow violates what we know of natural law.

Q: At what, then, do we look?
A: At the pattern. You could examine every single separate happening and phenomenon, human and natural, and in each separate case not see God. But this would be like someone who examined an exquisite fisherman's knit sweater and decided to find out what it is about the yarn that holds the sweater together and makes it so beautiful. They could then examine the yarn millimeter by millimeter, perhaps pulling the sweater apart in the process. They might learn much about the qualities of the yarn and wool. They might even conclude that they had learned all there was to learn about the sweater. But if all they looked at was the strand of wool in itself, they would never discover what holds the sweater together and what makes it beautiful. Unless you look at the pattern, at the way the yarn loops and ties and fastens, at the way the rows are related and at the intricate interconnections, you will never fathom the structure or the nature or the beauty of a sweater.
Q: That’s fine for sweaters. But what pattern do we look at in the world?
A: There are four aspects of pattern.

**The Pattern Part 1: The Fact of Pattern Itself**

To begin with, look at the fact that there is pattern. Not just that there is something rather than nothing—although this is impressive in its own right—but that there is a whole range of particular somethings rather than just a great lot of nothing in particular. There is order rather than chaos, there are things—all sorts of things—rather than a big primordial blob.

"Nonsense," you may say. "That’s just simple natural law in action, the unavoidable result of the laws of physics."

Perhaps it is. But was it unavoidable that the laws of physics should work just this way? Others have pointed out how an absurdly small change in any of a number of physical forces would yield a radically different universe. For instance, if the force that holds protons in an atomic nucleus were even slightly weaker or stronger, stars—and so also life as we know it—would be impossible.

And is it so simple? The manner in which infinitesimal something-or-others—they are, after all, neither energy nor matter, or perhaps both energy and matter, whose behavior can be predicted only in probabilities—the manner in which they manage to join together in the proper sorts of atoms and molecules is, to me, a cause for wonder. A greater wonder yet is how these still infinitesimally small molecules make the great leap from aggregations of infinitesimals—however numerous—to solid, visible things. How do any number of atoms, which are mostly empty space, turn into tables and chairs and mountains and little green lizards? How do subatomic whatever-they-are acquire color and solidity and identity as a chair?

I am not suggesting that God turns subatomic particles into atoms and then into molecules and then into chairs, giving them color and hardness in the process. I believe I have at least a vague idea of how this works. But the point is this: there is an exceptionally useful and necessary set of patterns here which allows for infinitesimals to become “things” of a very different nature, bridging such an improbable gap that if we did not take it for granted we would not find it credible.

All I wish to say is this: I wonder if we ought to take this so cavalierly for granted.

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2See Freeman Dyson’s essay “The Argument from Design” in *Disturbing the Universe* (Harper and Row, 1979). To be fair, also see Stephen Jay Gould’s argument about drawing too strong a conclusion from this in “Mind and Supermind” in *The Flamingo’s Smile* (W. W. Norton, 1985). (As we said, we are not dealing here with “proofs.”)
Look at this thing called life. Is this not a wonder? Is not the fact of life itself (not to mention its diversity, its beauty, its interrelatedness) a thing to marvel at?

There are some who would not agree. I do not mean those who would say that life's diversity, for instance, is a natural result of the process of evolution. I tend to agree, but it does not lessen the marvel for me. I refer here to the small group of scientists who argue that in fact there is no qualitative difference between living organisms and other chemical processes. They argue this on the basis that one can posit a series of intermediary steps leading from basic chemical reactions to what we call living organisms, which could be viewed as a simple chemical progression leading to the strategy of the cell.

But this is not a persuasive argument. To say that living organisms cannot be classified as different from other locales of chemical reactions because there are intermediate steps is like saying that animals ought not to be distinguished from plants because there are organisms that possess the features of both. However, while I cannot tell you whether protista are animal or vegetable or something else altogether, I can still distinguish a mammal from a conifer without pondering over it for too very long. And so can you.

Linguistic philosophy has long recognized that the existence of "borderline cases" does not argue against the existence of two genuinely separate classes. I do hope that no one believes that the presence of protista means that there aren't perfectly valid criteria for distinguishing plants from animals, petunias from porcupines. Similarly—and our common sense, modern philosophy, and the vast bulk of scientists are in agreement on this—while life and non-life both involve chemical reactions, life is qualitatively different in some very important ways.

And whether life represents the inevitable result of several billion years of chemical interactions on a planet such as ours, or whether it represents a one-in-a-trillion fluke, it is a source of wonder.

And among the living things of our world there are conscious beings. Descartes' famous utterance of "cogito ergo sum"—"I think, therefore I am"—is not nearly as important as the comment we can then make: "Because he thinks this, here is a conscious being."

Indeed, Descartes was a conscious being. I am a conscious being. I suspect that you are a conscious being as well. I not only feel, physically and emotionally, but I also think. And I am aware that I feel and think, and think about my feeling and thinking.

Life is a marvel in itself—and here is consciousness as well! We are, wonder of wonders, conscious beings.

I am not arguing that God gave us this consciousness by a special act or that this is what separates human beings from all other animals. In fact it is apparent that some other animals share a certain degree of self-
consciousness, most notably the great apes. (Might we notice this more in dolphins and whales if they were not so different from us that real communication is more difficult?)

Nor are we concerned here with the question of humanity's uniqueness in the universe. Whether or not there are other sentient creatures is an interesting question which—as of this writing—is unresolved. I expect it to remain that way for some time. But this is irrelevant to our point here.

Our point here is that consciousness and the mind—something that is non-physical, that transcends the physical, that is wondrous in itself—somehow develops from physical processes. Please note: I am not saying that we don't know how the brain works. Though there is much yet to learn, we understand more and more each passing year. And I have no doubt that if you and I applied ourselves to the subject we could acquire at least a basic understanding of neurons and synapses and the like. And obviously the mind, and consciousness, depend upon the brain. But they are not reducible to the brain. Again, we see the bridging of an incomprehensible gap: electro-chemical impulses give rise to a mind and to consciousness. Physical occurrences somehow translate into a thinking, feeling, willing, acting being.

And again, we take this pattern for granted.

The Pattern Part 3: Ethics and Aesthetics

To talk about the leap from subatomic particles and probabilities to objects as we know them, and to talk about the leap from chemistry to consciousness, is in a very real sense to engage in metaphysics. Of a somewhat different nature are considerations of our ethical and aesthetic senses, of the fact that we can recognize right and wrong and perceive beauty.

Let us turn first to the ethical. There are voluminous studies on how we acquire moral reasoning. But about the only conclusions they can draw are that we acquire this by stages as we grow up and that development of our moral reasoning can be encouraged by the right sort of instruction and example.

What these studies have not answered—what cannot be answered by studies and perhaps cannot be answered at all—is why we have this

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1 I find it interesting that those most familiar with the course of evolution on this planet—the paleontologists—are divided as to the likelihood of intelligent being evolving on other worlds, but are apparently united in the conviction that if intelligent life were to evolve elsewhere it would not resemble us. This is because of the immense number of circumstantial "accidents" over billions of years that form our particular path to consciousness (including, perhaps, periodic cometary bombardment of the earth and resulting extinctions). If this is correct, the strange creatures of science fiction movies, with two arms and two legs and a head, are far more like us than anything we are really likely to meet "out there". (See Stephen Jay Gould, *The Flamingo's Smile* [W. W. Norton and Co., 1983] pp. 403-413)
capacity in the first place. Remember, now, we are talking about our moral sense, not just about our ability to understand and comply with the rules of our society. Certainly our capacity to absorb the standards of our culture can be explained by psychology and sociology.

But we are not referring here to our ability to mimic our elders or to toe the line. Rather, we are referring here to our moral or ethical sense: our ability to recognize right and wrong, justice and injustice, even when inequity is socially acceptable and injustice is inherent in the existing structures.

Please note that we recognize what is right. This implies that there is more than our own subjective sense of right and wrong. Actions and situations are right or wrong in an objective sense, whether or not we have the ability to discern this. There is a right and a wrong. I'm not saying that it is always easy to figure out, although sometimes it is appallingly obvious. I am saying that it is always there, whether we can see it or not.

The conviction and drive of the great prophets did not come from their having devised a scheme of morality. It came from a sense of having discovered a truth so great and so powerful that it had to be shared. Some people, of course, feel this same way about "truths" that the rest of us find blatantly false and morally repugnant. The existence of fool's gold and the propensity of some people to be taken in by it do not, however, cast doubt on the existence of real gold, but rather on some people's faculties of discrimination. The fact that many people have value systems that do not appear particularly moral only increases the value and the marvel of good moral judgment.

You see, the wonder is not that we so often misidentify our society's standards with what is just and right, especially when it comes to those rules which favor our particular class or group. After all, these standards are inculcated in us on a daily basis in innumerable ways and are often reinforced by the heavy weight of self-interest. What is remarkable is the human capacity—in spite of this intensive societal indoctrination—to perceive where justice demands change, to discover that one's society or one's peers are morally wanting. We can recognize right and wrong, and we recognize that it is altogether independent of whatever may happen to be majority opinion at any given time or place.

Whence comes this moral capacity? And at the very least does it not make us aware of another level, another depth, of reality?

Then there is our aesthetic sense. You can explain why the sky is blue with reference to absorption and refraction and the length of light waves. Or you can explain why this wave-length looks blue to us with details about our retinas and optical nerves and brain processes. But how do you explain why this blue sky looks beautiful to us?

This faculty of ours is generally taken for granted and consequently overlooked, and the importance of beauty in our lives is greatly under-
rated. Beauty introduces an ethereal, uplifting breath into our lives. It affects our goals, our choices, our happiness. We find beauty not only in sunsets and grand vistas, not only in Rembrandt and Bach, but also in children's laughter and grandmothers' smiles, in acts of courage and self-sacrifice, in personal relationships and kindness and integrity. Whenever we allow ourselves to see past our own busyness and our own anxieties to recognize the beauty around us we allow ourselves an uplift that is more spiritual than we generally admit. (This is why beauty is an important aspect of the worship experience.)

To repeat the maxim that beauty is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder does not really help to explain this. Further, if you mean by this that the recognition of beauty is capricious or privatistic, without pattern or consensus—well, that is just plain wrong. Similarly, explanations based on aesthetic principles such as patterns, color, balance, harmonies, etc., can be helpful in explaining why certain paintings or symphonies (for instance) are considered masterpieces, but this still doesn't explain why we are able to recognize beauty at all. And any discussion just of the attributes of those things we consider beautiful is bound to fall woefully short of the depth and the richness of the reality we experience.

Again, we need to ask ourselves: whence comes this capability? What evolutionary purpose could it serve? And does it not make us aware of the non-physical as well as the physical realities of our universe?

The Pattern Part 4: Love

I now want to direct your attention to that aspect of “the pattern” that is perhaps best described by Robert Frost in “Mending Wall”:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall
That wants it down.

Frost was speaking of an old stone wall between apple trees and pines. My own experience is that this same observation would apply as well to other walls, to the walls of fear and hatred and misunderstanding that we humans build between one another.

As easily as these walls seem to grow, as consistently as they separate individuals, factions and nations, how can I suggest that there is a force that works against them? Must we not then posit an even stronger force working for them?

This is an important question. It deserves a careful answer. The difficulties it poses could be escaped with the easy but unchristian approach of crediting humans with all that is bad and God with all that is good. Certainly this has been done before. Or we could go one step further and credit the devil with all the evil, thus leaving humans responsible for nothing at all. Both of these approaches negate our responsibility for our own actions and ignore the reality of human will and our ability to do good or evil. We will not resort to either of these all-too-easy non-solutions.
What, then, do we say about our human propensities to selfishness and cruelty and plain mistakes? What do we say about these tendencies which, in combination with the fragility of the human psyche, seem to make walls necessary? It is true that the human spirit can be hard to break, but it is easily damaged. Survival often comes only at a high cost as we wall ourselves off from others in one way or another.

It is also true that at times we see wise and courageous souls bridge these barriers in ways that make walls seem weak and superfluous by comparison. But how can we say that the pattern, or even God, encourages one and discourages the other?

To begin with, we must accept the fact that we humans are capable of acting in an extremely wide variety of ways. Along with a large body of morally neutral acts, we are capable of behavior ranging from the inexpressibly wicked to the ineffably saintly. There is a very real difference between good and evil actions and this difference is not only in how these affect others. Our behavior and its effects interact with our own psyche as well. Just as we can expect certain types of behavior from people with certain types of personality, it is also true that certain actions help to develop certain types of character in us.

At this point I am going to make an unabashed value judgment. I claim with no misgivings whatsoever that some characters are better than others. And I most emphatically do not equate this with some people being happier than others. This needs to be said for two reasons. First, too many people equate happiness with pleasure or with other shallow emotions that come and go with the ups and downs of each day. Second, there is an absurd tendency to believe that our proper goal in life is this same happiness, and in fact some even equate it with “mental health”—as if the highest achievement of the human spirit were to enjoy itself!

I claim that it is better for a soul to have a certain character. It is better for a person to attain wholeness and maturity. This can be seen in some people: they are at ease in the world in a way that far transcends material ease. They are able to offer love and hope and good humor to others who need it. They lend security and strength and offer hospitality in its broadest sense in a world where most are strangers. This is not to say that they do not suffer hurt and anxiety and depression—of course they do. But their spirit has depth and breadth and is not defeated by external events.

This is the character which it is simply better for a soul to have. Something in us knows this, though we do not always acknowledge it. And for attaining this particular character, love works better than hate. For the all-important work of molding our most important possession, our own self—which is in fact the only thing that is truly our own—for molding this into something that has depth and breadth and substance, for nurturing it beyond the shallow and brittle and empty, acts of love
and courage and self-sacrifice are needed. This simply cannot be accomplished by living and acting in pettiness or hatred or fear. We must approach life with those attitudes which lead to as well as proceed from this great breadth of soul, if we want to have this kind of spirit ourselves. Caring, giving and sharing, without cavil or self-serving, with love for others—this is the way to develop a depth of character.¹

Something in us recognizes this wholeness, this greatness of soul, either in others or in incipient form in ourselves, and desires it—desires it and recognizes it as a higher, more important goal. When we strive for it we find that the pattern is such that we can only reach this goal through love.

Of course, we have other needs and other goals. To make the most of our potential, we need relationships that nurture our growth and development. We in turn can better nurture these needed relationships through love. The problem here, which may well be the problem for humanity, is that if we do not manage to meet our emotional needs through loving relationships we will try to meet them in other ways. Thus we may seek status or wealth or power to give ourselves a sense of worth. Or we may hide by being very busy in our work or house or hobbies, either afraid to reach out or unable to, avoiding the challenge and risk of life through uninvolvement, avoiding facing our own unhappiness through busyness. But this is not enough. Neither success nor busyness is enough.² Our spirits suffocate with no more than this. Our walls look solid, but a close inspection shows no foundation shoring them up.

Of course, we can go further astray than this and find our driving force in hatred and bitterness. Indeed, whole nations have sustained themselves on this for generations, finding their meaning and purpose and—if ever they triumphed—satisfaction. But the cost! The cost in stunted growth, in twisted lives, in narrow distorted spirits, is appalling.

¹And is this not also the essence of faith? In traditional terms, we are saying that good works, rightly done, can lead to faith—just as faith, rightly lived, will overflow in good works.

²"Oh, captive, bound and double-ironed," cried the phantom. "Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunities misused! Yet such was I! Oh! Such was I!"

"But you were always a good man of business, Jacob," faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself.

"Business!" cried the ghost, wringing its hands again. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!" (Scrooge and Marley in Stave I of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol.)
Those souls who would grow must either transplant themselves or overcome the poison in the very medium of their culture.

In summary: both in order to foster the relationships that nourish our own growth and in order to create in ourselves the broadest and best character, we do the best for ourselves when we act in that way which is also best for others—in love. This is the way the pattern is, the way it works.

Even in the midst of anger and fear, of hatred and violence, when a billion years worth of instinct gears us up for either fight or flight, something calls for us to break the vicious cycle and instead to reach out to the other with caring and understanding. I have seen the walls we humans have built of fear and prejudice and misunderstanding. These walls are buttressed by years of suffering or superstition and by what are supposed to be some of our deepest psychological needs. These walls are fearsome; they are depressing and discouraging; they are an inescapable fact of life.

But I have seen these walls breached. And I have felt it. Something there is that does not love a wall, that wants it down. We may have physical appetites for food and sex and rest and emotional appetites for status and power, but there is something in the pattern that encourages us in another direction, that encourages us to breach the walls, that pulls us to love.

Where Then Is God?

We began our discussion of patterns to answer the question of where to look for God. We have looked at various aspects of the pattern of the universe: at the way infinitesimal entities consisting mostly of empty space make up a solid world; at the existence of not only life itself but also conscious life; at the presence of ethical and aesthetic faculties in us; and at the soft but persistent pull toward love. Each of these, properly considered, is an occasion for great wonder.

But do these various parts of the pattern prove the existence of God? Of course not. God cannot be proved or disproved in this way. Of course, neither can the existence of the tree in my back yard be "proved". You have to experience it—you can see it by day or run into it in the dark. God cannot be seen as a tree is, but can be inferred or felt or run into.

One can respond to the marvelous realities that I have pointed out in one of two ways. One can say that these are all to be explained by natural law or by chance or by evolution, and nothing else lies behind them. Or one can say that another force or reality lies behind these. One can see confirmation here of a God whose presence or love one may have felt. These wonders fit with the idea of God. Those who see nothing but the immediately visible, those who do not see or infer God, must believe that the rest of us are hallucinating, have strong imaginations, or simply
misinterpret reality. Those of us who do see or feel the presence of God, on the other hand, are forced to conclude that the others are either blind, or closed off to the spiritual realities of this world, or simply unlucky enough not to have experienced God.⁴

For those of us who are open to God these aspects of the pattern help to point to this reality, to the way in which God is in the pattern. God is the context within which we all live.

II. What Does God Do?

Q: If God is to be found in the context of our world, how then do we speak of God acting? What does God do?

A: If God is to be found in the context, if it is this context that makes all action possible, then in one sense God can be credited or blamed for every single thing that happens. But this is not true in any meaningful sense. It confuses “making things possible” with “making things happen”. (Some readers—precious few, I warrant—will want to relate this to the difference between primary cause and sufficient cause.)

But then what do we mean by God acting, by God doing? If you want to look for God acting in a way outside of the natural processes of this world, for God going “zap!” so that you have an obvious and indisputable miracle—well, then we need to go back to Chapter 3 and begin to work this through all over again. However, I will make two assumptions here: first, that you have absolutely no inclination to read the last hundred or so pages over again; and second, that you understand by now why someone who shares my common sense cannot conceive of God as acting in this way.

But if God doesn’t do anything in the traditional sense of supernatural acts, then what does God do? Here is one of the central questions of all theology: What does God do?

God encourages. I do not mean that God is sitting on the heavenly sidelines rooting for us, shouting such things as “Come on, Smith, love your neighbor!”, or “Way to go, Jones!” I mean rather that God encourages all acts that are in keeping with the rule of love. I mean that through the processes of this world, including forces that transcend the physical (as we think of it), God is pulling/urging/coaxing each and every one of us in a certain direction. God does this as the context in which we live and through the processes of the world, not by going “zap”.

⁴Those who are particularly interested in this question and who are patient and persistent readers may wish to consult Hans Küng’s Does God Exist? (Vintage Books, 1981). Küng considers the challenges from Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—among others—in a comprehensive overview of the question of religion and God in recent history. He argues that God does exist, that this cannot be proved, but that it is a decision we must make whether, in the end, to trust in reality.
Other aspects of God’s “immanence” or involvement in the world also fit in this category of God’s encouragement through the processes. Such themes as God’s grace and the activity of God’s love and forgiveness are ways that God affects us through the context. The divine pull toward love is a real and pervasive aspect of the world in which we live.

III. What Is God Like?

So far we have addressed the immanence of God—God as present and active in the world. What can we say about the transcendence of God and the nature of God’s being?

Q: Can we say that God is infinite?
A: We must first admit that infinity is a difficult concept for us humans to grasp in any adequate sense. (Knowing how to use it in a calculus formula is not the same as understanding what it means.) We must also realize that we should specify, infinite in what respect? Size, strength, weight, or what? But insofar as we recognize “infinite” to mean that God encompasses the totality of being, is not bound by spatial and temporal limits as we are, is beyond what we see and know and beyond our ability to comprehend, then it is appropriate to speak of God as infinite.

Q: Is God omnipotent?
A: The question of whether God is all-powerful usually refers to God’s power to control events here on earth. And quite often people are asking, “Is God in charge?” If God can control events here but chooses not to, then this power is irrelevant to those who are asking this question.

So how do we answer this question about the power of God? Well, if neither our common sense nor our faith allows for an interventionist God, then we must respond by saying, “What do you mean? How is a question about power relevant to God?”

Indeed, we can no more talk about God’s omnipotence than we can about God’s gender or color. It doesn’t apply. God doesn’t work that way. After all, did not the Christ show us that worldly power, the power to control, is ultimately vain and empty? What has this kind of power to do with the divine?

Q: Is God omniscient?
A: In whatever way it is that God knows—and it is surely not the same way that you and I know things—I am sure that this knowledge extends to all of us. I am not sure that this knowledge extends to the future, but then I am not sure how the concept of time applies to God anyway.

Q: Is God a personal being? That is, is God an entity or unity that can be called a “person” in the broad sense?
A: Whole books have been written on what it means to be a person, but we all have a reasonably good idea of what it means. We might summarize it in this way: a person is a self-conscious being conscious of the world, of his or her self, and of the relationship between the two. A person is a unity that extends through time, a unity of mind and experience.

So the question is not whether God is some sort of giant human being. The question is whether God is a self-conscious unity.

To answer this question requires speculation in arenas unfamiliar to us. It is hard for us to envision the possibilities for conscious being outside the narrow confines of our own kind of existence. My own conclusion is that we can, and must, relate to God as personal being to personal being. This is the only appropriate way to do so. I am convinced that whatever sort of being God is, the nature of God's being includes consciousness and self-consciousness, and very likely transcends our understanding of these as well. God's attributes include self-awareness and the ability to relate to us as personal being to personal being.

This is a very important claim. On what do I base it? Neither on mystical revelation nor on theological necessity nor on human emotional needs. Rather, God's relating to us as person to person seems to fit with what I sense of the world and of God.

Again, I do not mean that we have God zapping in with personal communications like: “John Brown, this is God calling. Attack Harper's Ferry!” Rather, God relates to us as person in the context and through the processes of the world. The context in which we live is not impersonal.

It needs to be noted that two distinct claims have been made here: First, that God is a conscious and self-conscious being; and second, that there is an aspect of God that relates to us in our mode of existence as conscious personal beings, and that we can appropriately relate back to God only in this same way. The second is the more vital to our relationship to God, the one that makes it possible.

Q: One last question: does God care?

A: Now we are asked about God's feelings! But it is a necessary question. If God were omniscient and infinite and a whole range of other superlatives, but did not care about us, then God would not be the God we worship and might not even merit the name of God.

But God does care. This is a basic part of God's nature. Not only does God love us, it is even appropriate to say that, in pulling us to love through the context, God is love.

Obviously, the claim that God loves us is a statement of faith. It cannot be proven. But remember, neither can many other important parts of our lives be “proven”. And how would you respond if your spouse or child or parent asked you to prove that you loved them?
Still, our faith claim that God loves us must be consistent with our understanding of the world. So we point to God’s encouragement or pulling of us to love, and to the other wonders, as facts that fit well with our feeling of God’s love.

A related claim which elaborates and strengthens our understanding that God loves us, is the claim that God suffers with us. What stronger form of caring could there be than this?

But how do we conceive of God suffering with us? There are actually three possibilities in keeping with our theology. First, we could posit that God is omnisciently aware of all of our hurts and sorrows, and that God’s desire for our well-being is such that this causes God to suffer the equivalent of emotional pain. This is certainly conceivable and understandable but it will leave some people uncomfortable with its anthropomorphism.

A second alternative is to envision the gentle pull towards love as not merely an action of God, but as a part of God, an aspect of God’s being. Our resistance to this pull, our moving in the other direction, would then be a pulling or even a tearing of the fabric of God. God is then conceived of as suffering directly instead of vicariously.

A third alternative is to posit that if God is in the context, then God must be in each and every one of us as well. We all share in the being of God; God’s being includes each of us. In this conception God experiences our suffering even more directly, for our suffering is God’s as well through our being a part of God’s being.

Each of these three is a suitable conception. And any one of them strengthens our understanding of how God cares for us.

IV. Images of God

So far in this chapter we have looked at some of the wonders of our reality that fit with a belief in God, we have briefly answered the question of how God acts in this world (in keeping with our common sense), and we have addressed a few questions about what God is like. In all of these we were dealing with concepts, with the realm of ideas that must be logical and consistent. We have already spoken of the necessity of speaking clearly and carefully about God.

But concepts are not the only way in which we convey our understanding and our truths. As we noted in the last chapter, images or metaphors are also important and sometimes do better at communicating than do concepts. So in this section I will put forth some images of God which fit

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7Our success or failure in conceiving how this works does not, of course, determine whether or not it is a fact. But we ought not to postulate things like this without showing how they are compatible with the rest of our beliefs and with our common sense.
with our understanding. These images are only partially developed. You are encouraged to further develop these yourself and also to think of different images which you find helpful to your understanding of God.

In talking about God with images we do not say that God is such and such, we say that God is like such and such (the same way that Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God in his parables).

1. God Is Like the Sun

This is an analogy that has been used often and in a variety of ways over the centuries. And of course the sun has been worshipped as divine itself. Nevertheless, a helpful image can be found here.

We do not mean that God is like the sun in that it is distant and “up there”, or in that if you come too close you will be consumed or if you look at it directly you will be blinded. Rather, God is like the sun in this way: it may seem far away, but its rays are all around us. Its effects are diffuse, pervasive. It made possible the world in which we exist and continues to make it possible. It creates the context in which we live.

It not only sustains life, it also provides light to see and warmth for comfort. And (as an analogy to us) many plants are drawn toward the sun. They succeed only by growing sunward.

In these ways God is like the sun.

2. God Is Like Gravity

Before the tools of modern science, gravity could not be measured. We could only infer its existence. It cannot be seen. And yet there it most definitely is.

Gravity serves to hold things together. It is the attractive force which pulls bodies towards one another. It balances centrifugal forces to hold planets in orbit. It pulls things together, acting against the forces that pull things apart. Gravity is the pull, acting unseen through all creation. In these ways God is like gravity.

3. God Is Like the Magnetic Field

The magnetic field is invisible but surrounds us everywhere, encompassing the whole earth. But though it is all around us, it can only be detected by the right kind of sensitivity. Iron that is not magnetized will not respond to it.

And though it is all around us, it leads in a certain direction. Someone who is aware of it, who has a proper compass and who pays attention to this compass, can find their way.

In these ways God is like the magnetic field.

4. God Is Like the Water Cycle

We see water in our world in many different individual rivers and streams, oceans and ponds, puddles and raindrops. Yet it is all water. It
all derives from and is a part of the water cycle. Thus do we derive from
God, and thus does God participate in everything.

And God participates in us as the water cycle does. We may think of it
as being “out there”. But water is an integral part of us, a constituent
part of every cell in our body.

In these ways God is like the water cycle.

These are but outlines of images, but perhaps they will help some to
understand how we are conceiving of God. Certainly these and other
images need to be developed.

And now, having considered how God acts, we can continue our con-
sideration of Jesus of Nazareth as the functional Christ with the basic
question of “Why Jesus?”