

4. God — The Heart of Reality

Reality of God

Although 95% of Americans believe in God, it is clear that God is not the central passion of 95% of us.

Worldview = image of reality, our understanding of *what is real* and *what is possible*; "Metaphysics" or "ontology" in philosophical terms; culture's way of seeing things

- **Religious worldview:** in addition to physical world is a non-material level or dimension (God, Spirit, etc.)
- **Non-religious worldview:** there is no "More"—extra dimension. Material, secular worldview. Dominant worldview in modern, Western culture. For some: atheism or agnosticism. For some others: God is Prime Mover—supernatural being "out there" who creates and sets universe in motion and then leaves it alone.

Cannot prove reality of God but "data" suggests God:

- 1) Collective wisdom of world's religion grounded in what do (did) know.
- 2) Religious experiences, visionary, mystical as well as touch of divine in ordinary life.
- 3) Post-modern physics talks of processes outside space and time—there is more than spacetime universe of matter & energy.

Two Concepts of God

Supernatural theism and panentheism are two concepts of God and the God-world relationship that both go back thousands of years to the beginnings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

- **Supernatural theism**—personlike being who occasionally *intervenes* in the world He created. Earlier paradigm Christianity holds this view.
- **Panentheism**—God = encompassing Spirit in who the universe resides. God not separate from world. In who we live and move and have our being. *More* than the universe. Transcendence ("moreness") and immanence ("presence") of God. Instead of divine intervention, it is divine intention and divine interaction.

What about intercessory & petitionary prayer? Panentheism does not deny those prayers but extraordinary events are not intervention. Panentheism is content not to know why the event happened. Intercessory prayer is talked about more in chapter 9.

Supernatural theism is dominant in modern Western Christianity. Result of the rise of modern science, the Enlightenment.

Ancient view was of a small universe so "up in heaven" was not that far at all. Today "up there" is very far, so far in fact as to make heaven-God irrelevant. Supernatural theism for many is no longer compelling and persuasive. Earlier paradigm Christians hold onto supernatural theism.

Two more considerations of panentheism:

- "God" is not a particular, existing being (as in supernatural theism), but, rather, "ultimate reality" and "isness without limits".
- God is beyond words, beyond language. God cannot be named (recall Jacob's wrestle with God in Genesis 32:23–33). "The Tao (sacred) that can be named is not the eternal Tao."

God as Personal

Is panentheistic God *impersonal*? "Wholesale God" and "retail God"

- "Wholesale God" is the "ultimate reality" and "isness without limits" in the theology of all religions.
- "Retail God" is God, the central character, in a particular religion's sacred text. Usually, this God of personal devotions and worship *is* personified. But do NOT take the personification *literally*.

Many people need to hear about "wholesale God" so they can take "retail God" seriously. Use of personal language but God is not personlike being. Our relationship with God *is* personal.

Quality of a *presence* instead of a non-personal "energy" or "force". A "you" instead of an "it". God does "speak" to us—sometimes in visions and sometimes in "leadings", nudges. Transpersonal—"more than personal".

The Character of God

- Deeper than *will*. What is your God basically like?
 - God of requirements and rewards? Monarch. In extreme form it is the God of the "rapture" and "Left Behind" books. Those who believe Jesus died for our sins will be saved. Those who do not believe this, will not be saved.
 - God of love and justice? Prophets of Hebrew Bible talked of this God. Justice is the social form of love. Our relationship with God transforms us into compassionate beings.
- God of law vs. God of grace. Paul, Luther, and Protestant Reformation rejected God of law ("works"). Radical grace, acceptance of us is *unconditional* (*no* "ifs"). Unconditional grace is *not* about the afterlife but the basis for our relationship with God is *this* life. Seeing what is already true and then living in that relationship.
 - "Bad News": Religion as *threat* of what will happen at a last judgement.
 - "Good News": Religion as *invitation* to transform life and vision of transformed Earth.

Questions

1. How is Borg's statement of God not being the central passion of most of the population connected to the common view of faith as assensus (a "head matter") as described by Borg near the beginning of chapter 2?
2. Do you agree with Borg's statement that the reality of God cannot be proven in a scientific or materialistic sense? Would it threaten your relationship with God if the reality of God could not be proven? How so or how not?
3. How would you describe the two concepts of God that Borg discusses and which of those two concepts resonates most strongly with you? Is there a third alternative?
4. Do you agree or not agree with Borg's point that the view of "God up there" has led to many people dropping out of church (or not attending in the first place)? Why?
5. What does Borg mean by a "wholesale God" and a "retail God"?
6. Was Borg's distinction between a "wholesale God" and "retail God" helpful to you? If yes, why or how so? If no, why not?
7. What does Borg mean when he writes that many people need to hear about the "wholesale God" so that they can take the "retail God" seriously? How would that be helpful in Spirit-God discussions with the unchurched?
8. How would you describe your relationship with God: as one with a God of requirements and rewards or as one with a God of love and justice or as both? Explain how so.
9. Which of the two ways of imaging the character of God (requirements & rewards or love & justice) would be most helpful in Spirit-God discussions with the unchurched? How so?
10. Which of the two ways of imaging the character of God (requirements & rewards or love & justice) would be most helpful in transforming our world? How so?