



Chapter 7: God Needs a New Image

Excerpted from
GRIEF AND GOD: When Religion Does More Harm Than Healing
by Dr. Terri Daniel

Grieving people often ask me, “Why would God let this terrible thing happen?”

Assuming they are truly seeking an answer (rather than speaking rhetorically), I usually reply, “It depends on what you think God *is*.”

Similarly, when someone asks me if I believe in God, I answer with another question...“Which version of god are you referring to?”

During the time I spent as a hospital chaplain, when I’d enter a patient’s room and offer a visit, some of them would say, “No thanks.

I don’t believe in God.” And I’d reply, “Good! I don’t believe in *that* god either.”

In a 2016 article by my friend Bishop John Shelby Spong, he tells a story about his friend Richard Holloway, the presiding bishop of the Scottish Episcopal Church.²⁶¹ After giving a lecture, Holloway took questions from the audience, and when an elderly woman asked him, “Do you pray?” he simply said, “No.” The audience sat in stunned silence waiting for an explanation.

Holloway allowed them to sit with their discomfort for several seconds before he continued, “Madam, if I had answered your question with a ‘yes,’ you would have assumed that I accepted your definition of what it means to pray, and your definition of God. That would have been false and misleading, so I had to answer with a ‘no.’ Now, if we can discuss what we mean by the words “God” and “prayer,” and get beyond the confusion between God and Santa Claus, which grew out of our childhood, then my answer might be very different.”

This is *exactly* why God needs a new image.

Some people see God as a man-in-the-sky who disburses joy or sorrow, reward or punishment, either randomly or according to what we earn through our behavior. If it’s the former -- if our experiences are random and cannot be controlled -- then prayer and religiosity are pointless. If it’s the latter, and God is an authoritative parent whose blessings can be earned, then God is essentially running a protection racket. Even if blessings *could* be earned, the rewards are inconsistent and the conditions we must meet to earn them are unclear, which is a very bad form of parenting. When our good behavior isn’t rewarded, we feel abandoned, betrayed, terrified and completely alone. With this expectation, despite our efforts to earn the love of this fickle parent, there is no assurance of safety or protection. When the expectation of protection is not met -- and it can *never* be met -- we end up focused more on our feelings of anger and abandonment than on the valuable lessons our painful experiences can teach us.

In John 14:2, Jesus says to his disciples, “In my father’s house are many dwelling places.” In the world of spirit there are infinite places where consciousness can dwell. The non-physical (spiritual) world is so vast and so beyond our limited understanding that trying to make it fit into a tiny little doctrinal package is just plain foolishness. Paraphrasing something I wrote in *Turning the Corner on Grief Street*,

these “dwelling places” are levels of awareness in an ever-expanding network that contains the accumulation of all experience in all of creation. These levels are infinite; they are universes within universes within universes. They cannot be understood in human terms because they exist beyond three-dimensional reality.

Our earthly experiences -- whether joyful or tragic -- are like rooms inside those dwelling places. In fact, they are like dust in the corners of the rooms, or specks in the dust in the corners of the rooms, or cells inside the specks in the dust, which contain a billion more universes within them... and so on forever, beyond physical time and space. When looking at human experience from this vantage point, how could just one system of beliefs explain all that infinite possibility?

My hope is that grievors who struggle to make sense of absurd, unreasonable religious concepts will come to recognize that they're not confined to just one room in the many mansions of theological understanding. Images of God are meant to change as humanity evolves. Stagnation does not serve anyone.

In your own personal moments of theological reflection, I ask you to consider this... is it possible that some things are from God, and others are not? If God is the creator of everything, then all things would have to be from God, including the things that hurt us. If you are someone who believes in Satan, you might say, “All the evil things are from Satan, and the all good things are from God.” You might think, as Pat Robertson does,²⁶² that Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was punishment for America's acceptance of abortion. You might even agree with Jerry Falwell that the U.S. terrorist attack on 9/11 was because of “pagans, abortionists, feminists, gay people and the ACLU.”²⁶⁴

If you do agree with these things, and if you, as a person of faith, were a victim in one of these events, how would you justify your own suffering? How did you, a pious person, get caught in the crossfire of God's wrath? And how would you explain the suffering of righteous people who've been gunned down in churches, mosques and synagogues by violent extremists...while they were *praying*?

Much of the confusion inherent in religious doctrines could merely be a matter of semantics. Changing our image of God could be as simple as changing the language we use. A Christian's definition of *salvation* might be similar to a Buddhist's definition of *transcendence*. The need for salvation implies that something's wrong; that we are not where we should be, and we need to be rescued by an outside entity. Transcendence suggests that we can view our condition from a higher perspective and heal *ourselves*.

Consider the possibility that there is nothing wrong. Perhaps we are exactly what we should be... an evolving species experiencing all the drama, beauty and intensity of incarnation, which includes both love *and* loss. A spiritual crisis gives us the opportunity to form a new image of God, so why not choose an image based on oneness instead of twoness; an image we can experience as unity rather than separateness? That version of God does not live in a galaxy far, far away. It is not a *being*, and it is not a father, mother, protector or judge. It does not favor one group of people, one nation, or one set of beliefs over another. It is not angry, jealous or violent, nor is it loving, benevolent or forgiving. It is neutral. Or, as the brilliant rabbi David Cooper said, “God is a *verb*.”²⁶⁵