

An Evolving Conception of God

Some personal thoughts by Jay D Weaver

My early childhood concepts of God

When I was a small lad, one of my cousins asked me if I wanted to see a picture of God. He showed me a book that had a black and white artist's sketch of God as an old, wild-looking, bearded man. It must have made quite an impression on me, because 70 years later, I still remember that sketch. For many years, that was the impression that I carried in my mind when I thought about God.

Like most of you, I was taught that there is a place somewhere above the sky called Heaven. There God sits on a throne and controls the universe. Like Santa Claus, God knows everything I do and even my every thought. If I was a good person, I would be rewarded with a home in heaven. If not, upon my death I would be thrown into a place called hell that is somewhere beneath my feet. There I would go through eternal torment in unquenchable fire with no chance of ever being freed.

I believed that Jesus was standing beside the throne and assisting God in this process of sifting the souls of men, women, girls and boys. Yet I was taught that Jesus also pleaded with God on my behalf. I never quite understood how Jesus could be in that conflicted role, particularly since Jesus was also supposed to be God.

Then there was the Holy Spirit, who was supposed to live inside me. That was scary since I was also taught that to profane the Holy Spirit was an unforgivable sin. Nobody could explain to me what that really meant. Yet, the Holy Spirit was also called the comforter. I didn't find the concept very comforting. The whole notion of the Trinity was very difficult for me to comprehend. Sometimes it was Jesus that was in me, sometimes it was the Holy Spirit, and sometimes it was God. Yet I was told that you never pray to Jesus, but only to God. I wasn't sure about praying to the Holy Spirit. On top of that I was taught that they were all God. Wow, what a mess!

So, what to do? At age 14 I stood up in a revival meeting and made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. I was then baptized into the Mennonite Church. There were many things I didn't understand and I had many doubts about what I was being taught. In some ways those doubts continue today after 62 years as a member of the Christian church. There were preachers who said that having doubts was a sin. I had lots of doubts. For many years I worried about my relationship to God since I was also taught that my salvation was very dependent on what I believed.

I was also taught about the concept of grace, but that frightful image of God that I carried in my mind didn't seem like a very graceful person. As a matter of fact, God seemed a lot like my dad who usually didn't show me much mercy when I did something wrong. My mother was the one who often showed me what grace was. Yet, it didn't help me to have a mother who believed that if she might accidentally commit a sin and die before confessing that sin that she would burn in hell. Then there were those evangelists who were always talking about souls being lost in a dark eternity. My concept of God was very confused.

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My teenage and early adult years

For me this was a time of rebellion. I really didn't give a lot of thought to things theological. I was having too good a time growing up. Girls were the most important thing on my mind and cars were second, but I also took up smoking and having an occasional beer. I really was not all that bad, but I was not living exactly the way my parents wanted me to live. I was a good student and finished my college education, began a career in teaching, got married and started a family. All of these things took my attention. Even though I continued attending church regularly, my faith was not the most important item on my agenda. God was on the back burner.

When we were first married in 1955, we attended my wife Mary's church, the East Petersburg (now Hempfield) Church of the Brethren. I was re-baptized by immersion and became a member of that congregation. When I began teaching at West Reading High School in 1956, we moved to Shillington, PA where we sometimes attended the Reading Church of the Brethren, sometimes the Ephrata Church of the Brethren and sometimes the Lutheran Church right behind our apartment. When I began teaching at Warwick High School in 1957, we moved to Bareville, PA, where we attended the Conestoga Church of the Brethren. In 1958 I went to the University of Illinois to do graduate work. We lived for a year in Champaign, IL and attended the Champaign Church of the Brethren. Moving from congregation to congregation did not provide much opportunity for achieving any real depth in my faith. I buried those long-held doubts and, even though I always attended church faithfully, mainly due to Mary's prodding, matters of faith were pretty much neglected.

A Re-awakening

In 1959 I received my Master's Degree and began teaching at Millersville State College. Mary and I found a church home at the Lancaster Church of the Brethren. We enrolled in the Homebuilders Sunday School class and had teachers like Inez Long, Paul Rommel, and A. G. Breidenstine. My interest in things theological was renewed. I read books like Bishop Robinson's, *Honest to God*ⁱ, and began to discover some new ways of thinking about God. For the first time I began seeing God as a God of grace.

I also read Vernard Eller's book, *The Most Revealing Book in the Bible*,ⁱⁱ a study of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the final book in the Christian Bible. In that book Eller hints at the concept of universalism. I also recall a sermon by my pastor, John Long, in which he said, "I as a father could never condemn my son to torture. God is so much better a father than I am. How could he condemn his children to eternal damnation?" At some point, the Rev George Docherty from the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC preached a series of sermons at the Lancaster Church of the Brethren. I remember one thing he said, "Those of you who think you know who you will see in heaven and who you will not are in for a big surprise." Personally, I finally came to the conclusion that God might punish people, but a God of infinite grace will not sentence them to eternal torture. For me any hell that exists is in the here and now, not on the other side of the river. For me, God's terrible nature was being replaced by love.

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Even though I was trying to develop a personal theology, my knowledge of the scriptures was rather limited. During the late 1970's, I enrolled in the Quester's Bible Course under the tutelage of Dr. A. G. Breidenstine. After completing that four year program I also taught the course for six years. Having immersed myself in the scriptures, I now had a basis for re-examining some of my concepts of God. I needed this foundation as I dealt with my changing view of the world based on scientific knowledge.

My studies of science and mathematics had changed my whole world view rather drastically. I discovered that we do not live in a three-tiered universe with hell beneath our feet, the sky above us, and heaven beyond that. During the Spanish Inquisition, Galileo and others were tried and convicted of heresy because they claimed that the earth was not the center of the universe. We now know that those early scientists were correct. Our earth revolves around our sun. Our sun is one of millions of stars in our galaxy, the Milky Way, which in turn is one of billions of galaxies. The universe was formed as a result of the Big Bang billions of years ago. It takes light billions of years to go from one point in the universe to another. The biblical writers knew none of this. To them God might be reached by building a tower or climbing to a high mountain. In our time, knowing that God is not "up there," we changed our language to say God is "out there." How far out is God?

I no longer believed that the God, who created this universe, would periodically jump in and violate the physical laws by which it was created. Hence, I came to the conclusion that magic-like miracles do not really happen. I once was asked about this in a Quester's course that I was teaching. I found myself in deep trouble with some members of my class, when I responded honestly about my position on miracles. In my mind, it is not important if miracles really happened or not. The gospel writers were trying to teach us a lesson. The concepts behind the reported miracles are the important issue.

I finally came to the realization that the concept of God that I grew up with needed some drastic revision. It was almost like starting over. I really did not have much of a concept of God. Yet I continued to believe there was a God and I managed somehow to have a continuing relationship with the creator. As I struggled through the process of sorting out my beliefs, I began to grow in my faith, even though I was still far from having a personal theology. I was a work in progress and in fact I still am.

The Thoughtful Life Class

The Thoughtful Life Class at the Lancaster Church of the Brethren arose out of a re-structuring of the adult Sunday School program. I was a member of the task force that developed that course. The class was to be oriented toward topics that required more reading and a deeper discussion than the typical Sunday School class. One of the books we studied early on was Walter Wink's, *The Powers That Beⁱⁱⁱ*. That book opened my eyes to many new ways of looking at God and the Universe. In the introduction to that book Wink says, "Jesus himself, in his own life, broke the endless spiral of violence by absorbing its impact in his own flesh." My thinking about the atonement began to change.

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It was in the winter of 2001-02 that I was browsing the books on Amazon.com, when I came across a book entitled, *A New Christianity for a New World*^{iv} by John Shelby Spong. I sent for it and began to read it. I could not put it down. That book changed my life. I finally found someone who could put into words the doubts and misgivings about God that I had been carrying in my heart for years. I felt like I had received a new revelation.

Near the end of the book he says, "To be ready to move into this not fully clear vision is to face honestly the recognition that that place where the church, with its binding creeds and closed scripture, has traditionally dwelt is no longer a livable place." Later he says, "The few individuals who see, respond to, and move toward a new place will be the leaven in the lump, the salt in the soup, the light in the darkness, ultimately leading the reformation." I wanted to be part of that reformation.

I became a voracious reader of writers of the new theology. I have read many books by Spong, Marcus Borg, Jack Nelson-Pallmyer, Richard Horsely, Robert Wright, and many others. I was finally excited about learning about my God and the relationship between the creator and this universe in which I live. I felt a new freedom that I had never known before.

It was about this same time that Marcie Miller, my choir director at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Venice, Florida asked me to lead a 5-minute devotional each Sunday before the choir went into the sanctuary. I based the themes on either the season of the year or on the anthem that the choir was singing that morning. However, I used these devotionals as an opportunity to explore some of the things that I was learning in my reading. These devotionals were well received by the choir members. There is a real hunger out there for learning new truths. I felt like I was becoming a part of that reformation that Spong spoke of. During this past year I have self-published these devotionals as part of a book entitled *Footpaths through the Forest*^v. I do not pretend to be a theologian. I do not know all the answers, but I do think God has called me to speak of what I have come to believe.

My present concept of God (subject to change).

I no longer see God as a theistic being somewhere out there, who from time to time intervenes in the created universe and violates the physical laws of that universe. I no longer see God as a spirit hovering in space in the way the ancients believed in spirits with their many gods and evil spirits. I have come to embrace a God according to Spong's interpretation in his latest book, *Eternal Life: A New Vision*^{vi}.

He says that God has never been separate from creation. He explores the concepts of consciousness, self consciousness and universal consciousness. Somewhere in the evolution of life, there came a separation between conscious and unconscious beings (animal life vs. plant life). Much later, there developed a species that became self-conscious (human beings). Humans are the only species who are conscious of our own existence and consequently aware of our impending death.

Human beings in every culture have developed a concept of God and have some awareness of an existence larger than ourselves. This awareness is another step up the ladder of consciousness. Spong

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calls this a universal consciousness that goes to the heart of being human. Rather than searching somewhere "out there," it is by going deep within ourselves that we find the infinite (God). Spong says that Jesus had such a developed awareness of that relationship to God that he could make statements such as "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me" - John 14:11. Later in John 14:20, Jesus says, "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

When we speak of God living within us, what does that mean? Surely this indwelling is not in a physical sense. As a child, I sang "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus." Ancients thought of the heart as the seat of emotions. Today we know that the heart is merely a pump. God isn't in our hearts. We might say that God is in our brain, but the brain is a collection of neurons. God didn't find a niche inside those neurons. The only way that God can dwell in us is in our minds, that is our consciousness. Hence, our consciousness becomes one with God. The more we learn of this God, the deeper we dwell in that universal consciousness.

Spong says that rather than God coming from a separate existence into the life of mankind, God was always part of the human condition. Because Jesus was so aware of his relationship to God, universal consciousness found its fulfillment in his life. Because his consciousness became one with the eternal God, Jesus lived beyond his physical death. We call that the resurrection. So we as Christians join with the risen Christ in finding what Paul Tillich called the Ground of our Being.

In Galatians 2:19, 20 the apostle Paul says, "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Therefore, it is in following Jesus on the road to death and resurrection that we too become aware of that universal consciousness and we too find what Jesus called Eternal life.

Along with my own interpretation, this is a rather quick summary of what Spong says. I would suggest that you pick up a copy of this book and read it for yourself. I have read it twice, and I am now reading it a third time. The more I read it, the more sense this concept makes. So many of our beliefs put God in a box and limit who God is. I find this new way of looking at God in relationship to human beings as an intriguing one. In my searching I have come to believe that there are two things my personal conception of God cannot violate. (1) Known scientific fact, and (2) The nature of God as exhibited in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Even though I do not believe that God violates physical laws, I do believe that when we dwell in that universal consciousness, God can change the minds of men and women. For me prayer is the vehicle by which we explore that universal consciousness. It is where we meet God and learn to know God's ways. That is what worship is all about.

Another book that has been important in my evolving concept of God is *The Evolution of God*^{vii} by Robert Wright. Near the end of the book he makes a comparison of how we conceive God to the way physicists

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conceptualize the electron. The classical way to think of an electron is as a tiny particle that orbits a nucleus within the atom. However, in quantum physics the electron is often thought of as a wave. Yet no one knows exactly what an electron is. The conceptualization used by physicists is whatever form helps them solve a particular problem.

Wright goes on to say that if a physicist cannot really know what an electron is, then perhaps no human being can really know who or what God is. Maybe for many purposes, conceiving of God with human characteristics will suffice. However, for other purposes it may be necessary to view God in some other way. He says that a believer in God perceives patterns in the moral world and posits a source of these patterns and calls the source, "God." As a Christian, I see that pattern in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

I am not proposing that my present concept of God is the only legitimate one. You may have a completely different concept. Yours is probably just as valid as mine. We know that God cannot be put in a box. If we limit God, then God is no longer God. However, as searching humans we need some way to conceptualize our God. At the present time Spong's view has become my concept of God. It may and probably will change drastically as I continue my search.

ⁱ Robinson, John A. T. *Honest to God*. Philadelphia, PA, The Westminster Press 1963

ⁱⁱ Eller, Vernard *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1974. Available online at www.hccentral.com/eller7/index.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Wink, Walter *The Powers that Be*. New York, NY, Doubleday, 1998. ISBN 0-385-48752-5

^{iv} Spong, John Shelby *A New Christianity for a New World*. San Francisco, CA, HarperCollins, 2001. ISBN 0-06-067084-3

^v Weaver, Jay D. *Footpaths through the Forest*. Lancaster, PA Self-published, 2009. ISBN 978-1601261960

^{vi} Spong, John Shelby *Eternal Life: A New Vision Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell*. San Francisco, CA, Harper One, 2009. ISBN 978-0-06-076206-3

^{vii} Wright, Robert *The Evolution of God*. New York, NY, Little, Brown, and Co., 2009. ISBN 978-0-316-73491-2