

Rethinking God

A spiritual process

BY MURRAY SHORT

The way we understand God, ourselves, and our relationship to the natural world shapes every aspect of how we live and act. If our sense of religion or theology is outdated, disconnected from contemporary scientific understanding, or trapped in institutional forms that no longer serve life, then our responses to global crises will be inadequate at best, and potentially harmful at worst.

How we think about God really matters and I have been rethinking my views of God for this reason. In her article titled *Is Christianity in Crisis or Transition* (Today's American Catholic, August 7, 2025), from which the opening quote comes, Ilia Delio issues a challenge:

The traditionalists retreat into a romanticized past, finding comfort in ritual and hierarchy while largely ignoring the ecological and social crises of our time. The progressives embrace social justice and interfaith dialogue but often lack the theological depth to sustain their activism or connect it to a coherent vision of God's work in the world. Neither approach adequately addresses the fundamental challenge: how to recover the cosmic dimensions of Christian faith in a way that speaks to contemporary experience and understanding.

In a religious society founded on the principle of the 'priesthood of the membership' I have only recently begun to pull my weight and am amongst the progressives Ilia Delio describes as lacking 'theological depth.' My theological perspective has been limited to a rejection of the prevailing way of thinking about God and either retreating into a non-theology called non-theism, or into a notion that God was entirely a mystery beyond human conception and only to be experienced. If God was a mystery and only experience mattered, why bother thinking about God?

My mother Phyl's approach to theology reinforced for me why we need to bother. Phyl evidently understood, like Ilia Delio, that how we think about God 'shapes every aspect of how we live and act.' Phyl wrote, 'Ask me about God, and I'd have to say that I really don't know...Of course I have degendered the word and de-anthropomorphised it' (Phyllis Short, *On These Islands*, 3.34). Whilst accepting that ultimately God may be beyond conception, she was very clear about some of the things God was not, particularly that God was neither male nor human. She was aware that if we think of God as male, it places men at the centre of creation, and this can have profound implications for the way we live by reinforcing the patriarchal way of structuring society. If we think of God as human, it places humankind at the centre of creation thus reinforcing the notion that the rest of creation is there for our taking.

With reference to learning of God from the Scriptures, Isaac Penington said, 'And the end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter.' (QFP Britain YM, 27.27) It seems evident to me that our 'knowledge of things' keeps expanding and therefore, 'what words can utter' can keep expanding with it. That will only happen if we are open to revelation and follow the spiritual disciplines, which include worship, reflection, creativity, study, discussion and service.

At this late stage of life, I have begun to identify other things that I think God is not. I am following an ancient path going back to the 5th-6th century Christian thinker Denys the Areopagite and called apophatic or negative theology. In my quest I have found the book *The God We Never Knew* by Marcus Borg helpful in opening my eyes to various ways of thinking about God and from that identifying what for me, God is not.

Borg describes clusters of characteristics associated with two main ways of thinking about God. The clusters are the common one of God as supreme, omnipotent being 'out there' somewhere who intervenes actively in human affairs and God as Spirit in everything in the universe.

The characteristics that cluster around the first way of thinking about God include God as lord, king and father, the lawgiver, judge and punisher. Borg describes this as the 'monarchical' or 'performance model' because God as 'finger shaker,' is seen as setting out the moral codes that shape human behaviour. The model emphasises that life is about meeting God's requirements, the things one had to do in order to be saved and go to heaven in the afterlife.

Borg describes the other way of thinking about God as being the Spirit in everything and everything in the Spirit. The characteristics that cluster around this way of thinking include God as love, breath, light, wind, rock, and fire. Borg calls this the 'Spirit' or 'relational' model and it emphasises a life of relationships. For most of my life, I reacted against the performance model. From early on, I found much of that model, including seeing God as the supreme being out there somewhere who actively intervened in human affairs, was 'disconnected from contemporary scientific understanding.' I also struggled with the age-old problem of how an omnipotent God capable of intervening would allow the suffering of innocents whilst evil often continued unpunished. The traditional explanation for this is that God has a bigger plan that is beyond human conception. I find this not only unconvincing, but outright objectionable. The notion that God's plan, however big, could include the suffering of innocents simply does not fit with my experience of a loving, life-sustaining God.

As well as thinking that God is not human or male, I am now thinking that God is not the supreme being who has a plan for humankind and sets requirements, rewards obedience, and punishes infractions. It seems to me that the only requirement that is sacred, or of God, is to live in synchrony with the laws of nature, the purpose of which is to ensure ongoing sustainability and continuing creation, otherwise known as evolution. Most of creation follows this requirement by the dictates of instinct, and this is how God is made manifest in the world. As described poetically in the Christian creation story in Genesis, only humankind has evolved the level of knowledge to make choices, which include those about following the laws of nature. However, God cannot be made manifest by choices that are out of synchrony with those laws and so, if humankind makes such choices, self-destruction will result.



God does not set other requirements, so other laws, codes of behaviour and punishments are of human making. At their best these laws and codes are inspired by human understanding of what is in synchrony with the laws of nature, which are fundamentally about sustainability in all creation. Many however, simply reinforce the norms determined by the political and religious powers of the day. There are many examples of such laws in Exodus, an extreme one being, 'If a man sells his daughter as a slave, she is not to be set free, as male slaves are' (Exodus 21:7). Attributing such laws and moral codes to God, as a literal reading of the Scriptures does, can lead to a sense of separation from, or rejection of God for those who like me, consider them to be expressions of an ancient culture some of which are objectionable in the contemporary context. Uncoupling God from moral codes of human making has been a liberating experience for me.

It wasn't until I read Buber's *I and Thou* that I began to understand an alternative, relational way of thinking about God. Buber's idea is that we encounter God in relationships with each other and nature. Quakerism is founded on the idea of that of God in everyone, which I see as a step towards this relational and panentheistic view. In contrast to monotheism, panentheism sees the Spirit in all creation. In my thinking, I now include God not only in everyone, but also in everything and everywhere in the universe. God is the Spirit in which we breathe and have our being, and when in 'right relationship' with God, we are in right relationship with each other and the natural world. Nayler, the early Quaker, expressed this clearly when he said that while people 'stood in that will which had set all these things in their place' they were 'at unity with all creation' but 'a changed relationship with God led to a changed relationship with the rest of creation.'

In monotheism we attribute the Spirit to an image called God and speak of the 'Spirit of God.' In other religions there can be images of many Gods. Like Phyl, I 'really don't know' what this God is, or these Gods are. What I do know is that like the feelings we experience through our emotional capacity, what we experience through our spiritual capacity, whilst perfectly natural, is not part of the physical or rational realm. Ultimately the experience of God, which is very real to me, is therefore beyond rational explanation. We can use metaphors to describe what the experience is like and sometimes we can see the effects of the experience, but we cannot prove its existence intellectually. Being clearer about what God is not however, is helping me, in Ilia Delio's terms, to 'recover the cosmic dimensions of Christian faith in a way that speaks to contemporary experience and understanding.'

Changing the way we think about God is a spiritual process and early Quakers described such a process in their time as the Lamb's War. Of this war Nayler said, 'The Lamb's life leads out of the world's ways... into the peaceable kingdom, where none shall hurt nor destroy' (Nayler, *The Lamb's War*). At their heart, the crises we face are spiritual crises the solutions to which lie in the ways we think about our relationship with God and therefore with the whole of creation.