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"Will the real God please stand up?": To tell the truth practical theology style

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Abstract

The long-running popular American television show "To Tell the Truth" involved having celebrity panellists select the real holder of an unusual job from a group made up of two imposters and an authentic contestant. After a period of questioning and reflection, the big reveal would come with the now iconic tag line, "Will the Real X please stand up?" Like multiple contestants on the game show, empirical research consistently demonstrates that people in predominantly Christian countries like the United States hold differing views about the nature of God. Such research begs the question, "Will the real God please stand up?" More than simply an interesting matter of scholarly debate, views of God have real world moral and political consequences for the individuals and communities who hold them. Responding to the organizing question of the 2023 Global Network conference from an orientation within the field of practical theology involves taking seriously the available empirical evidence for beliefs about God in particular cultural contexts and relating those views to conceptions of the divine that arise from theological work premised on special revelation and ecclesial traditions. This article will offer an answer to the organizing question in a way that would make sense to at least some practical theologians.

Keywords

nature of God; United States context; moral and political consequences; empirical evidence for beliefs about God

The popular American television show in the 1950s and 1960s – and back again now – "To Tell the Truth" involves having celebrity panellists select the real holder of an unusual job from a group made up of two imposters and an authentic contestant. After a period of questioning and debate among the celebrity panellists, the big reveal would come with the iconic tag line, "Will the Real X please stand up?" It would be fascinating to play this game in relation to the concept of God in the American context today. After a period of questioning of various candidates and not a little debate,

a big reveal come in answer to the question, "Would the real God please stand up?"

The overarching question guiding the Global Network conference in Stellenbosch – "A God of Justice and Reconciliation?" – could be seen as a bit of a trick question. It could function *as a thesis* which invites exploration, agreement, rejection, or critical debate. Along these lines, it might signal that the doctrine of God cannot be defined in relation simply to one or the other of the key terms, but somehow it must hold both concepts together. If the question is really a covertly offered thesis, then such conversations would likely lead to a dialectical synthesis in which both justice and reconciliation are understood as aspects of God that need to be held together. The real focus would then be on the best ways to coordinate or integrate the notions of justice and reconciliation in the way we conceive of God. I am not opposed to the question as a thesis, and I will return to this possibility at the end of my remarks.

What if, though, the conference question is not so much a Trojan horse thesis as much as *a genuine inquiry* into the way in which people in particular contexts actually conceive of God – and what ethical and political consequences flow from whichever conception of God holds sway. Could it be that there are people today who gravitate more toward one conception of divinity rather than the other?

Seen as a genuine question for inquiry into human "facts on the ground" as much as metaphysical reality, two further questions arise. Why just these two conceptions or metaphors for God? Why "A God of Justice and Reconciliation?" Why not include other metaphors for God? Why not include several other metaphors for understanding God today? Does this particular pairing of metaphors arise from a certain political agenda or situation? Is the conference question a way to grapple with the problems of post-1994 South Africa and, perhaps, with other contexts like mine that are laden with racist memories as well as vexing current realities? How were the notions of "justice" and "reconciliation" selected from the multitude of available metaphors from Scripture and from our various ecclesial and cultural traditions?

The second set of questions that arise from thinking about the organizing question of the conference as an open question has to do with how we might go about answering the question.

Do we begin by searching the Scriptures because we think that in them, we will find the right answer? Or do we begin by consulting our favourite theologians to see what they might have to say on the question? Or perhaps do we could excavate the layers of tradition in our respective churches in order to "vindicate tradition" as Jaroslav Pelikan advocates?[1] Or could we begin by examining contemporary empirical evidence to determine "facts on the ground" of what people actually believe about who God is as spur to theological reflection on the question?

In the first part of my reflections here, I begin with the last option. I engage empirical research on the question of the conception of God from my American context and the implications of that conception for ethics and politics in that particular cultural context. I do not presume to speak about the way people conceive of God in contexts like South Africa, Hong Kong, Norway, or Hungary. I will, therefore, limit my comments to contemporary empirical evidence related to the American context. In the second part of what I offer, I return to the possibility that the conference question actually points to a constructive proposal, partly based on a grappling with the "evidence from below" as a necessary way to situate "evidence from above."

Views of God: Empirical research from the American context

Talking about the reality of God in any strong epistemological sense has been a problem for modern human beings for the entire 200,000-year history of our species. Our ancestors and we ourselves have always made claims about the reality of the divine which are too often mistaken for the reality itself. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the various and sundry views of God often look strangely like ourselves writ large. The ancient Greek thinker Xenophanes perhaps captured this problem best when he wrote that:

> But mortals suppose that gods are born, wear their own clothes and have a voice and body. (frag. 14)

1 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 1986).

> But if horses or oxen or lions had hands
>
> or could draw with their hands and accomplish such works as men,
>
> horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, and the oxen as similar to oxen,
>
> and they would make the bodies of the sort which each of them had. (frag. 15)[2]

The tendency toward anthropomorphic projection onto the blank canvas of the divine has a long history and the details need not be rehearsed here. Such transference of human experience onto the divine does what we humans always do: we draw from our bodily experiences of the natural and social worlds in order to construct metaphors through which, in turn, we see and construct the worlds we inhabit. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point out in their writings, such anthropomorphism is inevitable as all human thinking is metaphorical in character and all of our metaphors are, ultimately, rooted in our bodily interaction with the ecological and cultural environments within which we find ourselves.[3] One concrete implication of this tendency toward anthropomorphic thinking about the mystery of God is to ask a critical question about the conference theme itself: Are we asking the question primarily about God or are we asking it about ourselves and our social and political realities?

One compelling way beyond the seemingly self-enclosed character of metaphorical thought about God in anthropomorphic terms is simply to claim that God is beyond our metaphors and our experience-informed imagination. The way of apophasis or "negative theology" places a large question mark on the objective reality of God, even various biblical portrayals of God – particularly those offered in anthropomorphic terms. Apophasis yields three insights for us. First, whatever we think we think about God, the reality is other than that. Second, God is not "one thing among other things." Third, to draw from II Isaiah, God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa. 55.8). When speaking

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2 "Xenophanes," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. [Online]. Available: https://iep.utm.edu/xenoph/. [Accessed: September 13, 2023].

3 See, for example, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003).

of God, then, we have to recognize that we are often really just talking about ourselves and our very human issues in a sophisticated smoke screen of theological code. More than that, much of the history of our theological work on the character and actions of God looks in retrospect like an unconscious seeking to gain ultimate ratification on our various ways of seeing reality as well as plans for "Christian" action – particularly in relation to White supremacy, patriarchy, classism, heteronormativity, ableism, capitalism, and colonialism. Do we really know what it means to claim that God is a God of justice? Of reconciliation? Of some coordination of both? Whatever we think we know in answer to these questions, we have to hold our convictions with humility and openness to revision since the reality is very likely to make all of our theological speculations seem like mud pies.

Leaving the metaphysical reality to the side for now, let us turn to the question of what it is that we can learn about the conference theme by looking to the human phenomenon of different ways that Americans conceive of God and how those conceptions matter.

A number of sociologists and sociologically-based research groups in the American context have in recent decades studied how American adults and youth conceive of God.

Pew Research, for example, shows that there have been significant shifts about the way Americans conceive of God in recent years. Of the 80% or so who still believe in God, only 56% say that they believe in a view of God that arises from the Bible. Approximately 23% believe in a "higher power" or a spiritual force. Interestingly and perhaps, surprising, among those who say that they don't believe in God do also believe in some sort of "higher power." Pew observes the following:

> Simply put, the U.S. is in the midst of significant religious change. The share of Americans who identify with Christianity is declining, while the share of Americans who say they have no religion (including self- described atheists, agnostics, and those who identify, religiously, as "nothing in particular") is *growing rapidly.* Surveys also show that the percentage of Americans who believe in God has *ticked downward* in recent years. In Pew Research Center's 2007 Religious Landscape Study, for example, 92% of U.S. adults

> said "yes" when asked if they believe in "God or a universal spirit." When the study was repeated in 2014, the share who said they believe in God had slipped to 89%. Over the same period, the share of Americans who said they believe in God with absolute certainty declined even more sharply (from 71% in 2007 to 63% in 2014).[4]

Only slightly more than half of Americans now believe in a conception of deity arising from traditional biblical teachings. I am not sure what this means for thinking about "A God of Justice and Reconciliation" if concepts like divine justice and divine reconciliation arising from biblical metaphors are not in play for nearly half of the population.

Interestingly, the percentage of Americans who believe in the biblical God tend to emphasize a view of God who loves them (97%) much more than a God who holds them accountable for their sins (50%). Apparently, Americans who still believe in the God of the Bible tend to lean strongly toward the God of reconciliation more than the God of justice conceptions.

This last idea finds reinforcement in the work of Chris Smith on American youth in the 2000s. Across all demographic and religious categories, Smith found that teenagers 20 years ago who are young adults today tended to believe in a view of God that he characterizes from the empirical research as "moral therapeutic deism." In sum, this view of God entails:

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the *Bible* and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to *heaven* when they die.[5]

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4 Pew Research Center, "When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?" April 25, 2018. [Online]. Available: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/. [Accessed: September 14, 2023].

5 Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005), 162-3.

This view of a moral God in the sky entails in essence that God wants to you to be nice to people and that if you get into trouble you can count on divine help. As my colleague, Kenda Dean, points out in the title of her practical theology work on Smith's research, this is *Almost Christian*.[6] This God is solitary, unipersonal, and transcendent – like the Deist conception of God of the Enlightenment rationalists; not the triune God of traditional Christianity. Translated into the terms of the animating question of the conference, the idea would be that the one God wants us all to be nice, to do the right thing, and to get along with one another. Such a view, I would argue, is weak in relation to the notion of divine justice and not very convincing on divine reconciliation. At best, it is a celebration of benevolent divine mediocrity.

The work of George Lakoff, of metaphor and cognition fame, has done further work on American conceptions of God and their implications for ethics and politics in the contemporary situation. In his book *The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to Your Brain and its Politics*, he suggests that the empirical data points to a two-fold orientation of Americans concerning views of the divine reality: God as Strict Father and God as Nurturant Parent.[7] Those who adhere to the "strict father" view of God tend to be more conservative, authoritarian, patriarchal, Republican, and evangelical. This group emphasizes personal responsibility and accountability for each individual's sins. On the opposite side of things, stand those who see God as a Nurturant Parent and who tend to be more liberal, inclusive of diversity, Democratic, and mainline Protestant. This second group emphasizes the importance of overcoming estrangements and dehumanizing political agendas as well as changing unjust social structures. Lakoff's work sheds some light on the growing binary division in American life between religio-political conservatives and religio-political progressives. Lakoff shows how views of God line up with ethical and political agendas.

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6 Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford, 2010).

7 George Lakoff, *The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to Your Brain and Its Politics* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

Lakoff's work carries interesting parallels with the analysis of Roger Fisher and William Ury in their now classic work, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*.[8] Fisher and Ury argue that conflict resolution tends to break down when conducted on the basis of what they call "positional bargaining."[9] This is when antagonistic parties reason their way from deeply held concerns in a conflict toward particular solutions or positions, which then become the starting point of negotiation. There are two versions of positional bargaining: hard (which emphasizes the principles at stake, no matter the relational collateral damage) and soft (which involves attempting to preserve relationships by giving away most everything of substance or principle). As with Lakoff, we can map the two forms of positional bargaining onto views of God that either foreground justice and accountability or those that emphasize the preservation and repair of relationships.

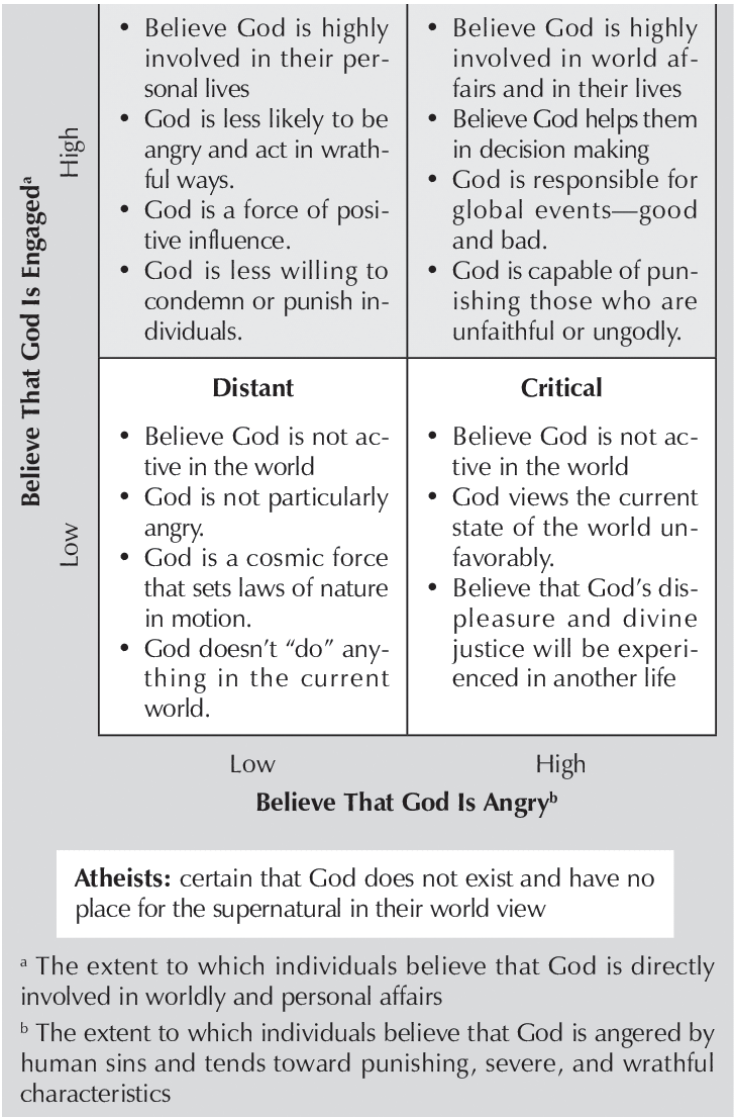
Building on but going beyond Lakoff's empirical analysis of American views of God and how they play out in ethics and politics, particularly illuminating work has been conducted by Paul Froese and Christopher Bader through the Baylor Religion Survey. In their book which summaries the survey findings, *America's Four Gods: What we Say about God and What that Says about Us*,[10] Froese and Bader posit that American's views of God have to be seen in relation to a matrix defined by beliefs about God's interaction with the world and God's judgment of the world. This yields not Lakoff's two predominant views of God, but four: [11]

8 Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (New York: Penguin, 2011), Ch. 1.

9 Ibid.

10 Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods: What we Say about God and What that Says about Us* (New York: Oxford, 2015).

11 Ibid., 143.



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12 Image of God Categories Note. From "American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the U.S." (pp. 26-27), by C. Bader, K. Dogherty, P. Froese, B. Johnson, F.C. Mencken, J.Z. Park, & R. Stark, 2006, Waco, TX: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion. Copyright 2006 by Baylor Institute for

When we look at the empirical data, we see that views of the authority of the Bible, denomination, region, race, gender, education, and household income each play a role here. In other words, many sociological factors exert influence on the conception of God that Americans hold – even when they read the same Bible. It is a complex picture and time does not permit going into all the nuances, but common to these various empirical studies of conceptions of God held by Americans is the idea that views of God have consequences for things like views of gender, race, sexual orientation, science, and politics. The way people view God or ultimate reality is connected with the way they see the world and how they navigate pressing contemporary ethical and political issues.

Hazarding an ironic answer to the conference question

As theologians and religious thinkers of various kinds, we can only get so far on the question of God by examining the empirical evidence for how people conceive of divinity. Paying attention to such evidence, however, does provides us with a portrait of the cultural landscape in which we are working. However we end up answering the question of the conference, we will have to communicate that answer to people in particular cultural settings and in relation to major ethical and political issues of the times in which we live: violence, poverty, the dehumanizing effects and aftereffects of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, ableism, and the environmental crisis.

At a deeper level, paying attention to the empirical evidence provides us with some clues about how to think normatively about the question before us. If people tend to divide up into two or, perhaps, even four camps on the God question, perhaps we can see some clues as to a way to write, preach, and teach in a constructive manner that helps to move people who believe in God beyond reductionistic certainty. While it is not clear to me which comes first: one's demographic and cultural reality or one's view of God, it does make sense to me that theological leaders attempt to address the various pressing issues but also at the level of people's conception of

Studies of Religion. Adapted with permission. [Online]. Available: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Image-of-God-Categories-Note-From-American-Piety-in-the-21st-Century-New-Insights-to_fig2_51087939. [Accessed: September 14, 2023].

ultimate reality and the way that those views of God shape their worldview and decisions in the world.

One implication of thinking normatively with the descriptive in mind, might be that the views of God held by various groups – even my opponents or enemies – may not be totally and utterly wrong. Instead, they may just be partial or fragmentary in character. The same must also be true for me and my primary reference group.

Perhaps our distinctive contribution as religious leaders to various contemporary social problems involves finding ways to bring two or more biblical metaphors for God together into a larger or more synthetic frame. As with Fisher and Ury, we might think about how to preach and teach a view of God that is both high on accountability based on principles of justice and at the same time is high on relationships and working to overcome dehumanizing alienations.[13] We can martial our intellectual and rhetorical resources to help the wider public to see that God cannot be reduced to simple or one-dimensional metaphors. We might be able to coax various partisans to develop a place to stand while remaining open to the truth(s) of other conceptions of God while simultaneously encouraging people on all sides to remain open to the transcendent and category-defying, metaphor-busting mystery of God. Perhaps it is our job to de-domesticate God among those who are absolutely certain that they have the right answer about God and to criticize every idolatrous, distorted, or partial notion of the divine.

I would argue that the best way to do such re-thinking about God for out day can be helped at a number of points by Paul the Apostle. One way forward would be for us as theological and religious leaders of the imaginations of communities of believers and the wider public may be to say with Paul, "I came among you knowing nothing but Christ and him crucified." This is not so much a metaphor as an event that criticizes and sometimes coordinates and our metaphors for God.

It seems to me that the theological answer to the question posed both by the conference and by the empirical realities of American conceptions of deity finds a compelling answer in Paul's theology of the cross. Due to the

13 Fischer and Ury refer to "principled negotiation" (as opposed to "positional bargaining") as a strategy that holds together principles and relationships. *Getting to Yes,* Ch. 1.

limitations of time, I will end by reflecting briefly on II Corinthians 5:16–21:

> From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Here we see two relevant claims in juxtaposition: God made Christ (who knew no sin) to be sin and God reconciles the world through the crucifixion event. In Paul's first claim, we see the unique and even shocking way that God is a God of justice. God is the one who metes out justice by taking human sin "upon" or "into" Godself. Rather than making humans pay for their evils, injustices, and dehumanizing tasks in an "eye for an eye" manner, God has caused the "God-made-human" to pay for all of the terrible and traumatic sins of humanity. To use a contemporary image, God has fallen on the grenade of racism, sexism, and so on and taken the horrors of sin into Godself and overcome them in the apocalyptic event of the cross for our sakes and on our behalf.

In the second statement from the same paragraph, we see that God is simultaneously a God of reconciliation who cares about the repair of broken relationships. God takes the initiative to heal the rupture in the relationship between God and the human family through the unique way in which God handles the matter of justice. In turn, we humans are called to take up the work of repair and healing with one another as those who represent a God whose justice and reconciliation are coincident.

Paul's view of the crucifixion event in II Corinthians 5 helps us to see that justice and reconciliation come together in the apocalyptic event of the cross. Paul seems to suggest to us that the question of the kind of God who

deals with injustice and brokenness must be viewed at the foot of the cross. Apart from the cross, there may be no effective Christian way to answer the question of a God who is simultaneously just and reconciling.

What Paul's convergence of the metaphors of God of justice and the God of reconciliation in the crucifixion event means for ethics and politics remains to be fully worked out for our day. In the American context, it suggests that we might find a powerful resource for dealing with American educator bell hooks calls "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy"[14] as the reigning pantheon of idols at work in my social context. In American public discourse, theological and religious leaders can contribute to the avoidance of another civil war by ceasing to dig deeper into the fortresses of a God of justice and a God of reconciliation by, instead, grappling with the Crucified God.[15]

Conclusion

Like contestants on the game show "To Tell the Truth," empirical research demonstrates that people in the United States hold differing views about the nature of God and that those views of God entail very different conceptions of ethics and politics. One way to respond to the organizing question of the conference from an orientation within the field of practical theology involves taking seriously the available empirical evidence for beliefs about God in a particular cultural contexts and relating those views to conceptions of the divine that arise from theological sources ultimately based on biblical revelation in order to destabilize what people take to be absolute truth about God.

I have always liked the German term "Auferstehen." It literally means, "To stand up." It is a term used in connection with the the Easter event. To circle back to the beginning of my remarks, I believe that when we see the real God stand up, it will be Jesus – the one who was Crucified and, as such, is the embodiment of the God of justice and reconciliation. With such a

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14 bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 46.

15 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015 [1973]).