


In the image of God

Heather Campbell-Enns

Scriptural images of God abound, representing God as a potter, a shepherd, a hen, the sun, a hammer, a protective shield, nourishing milk, a labouring woman, and more.¹ Divine imagery has various purposes, including evoking our curiosity about God. If we remain with our curiosity and examine the images, we are drawn into the scriptural story, and God's nature is revealed to us. Further, as we encounter God through imagery, the images become meaningful guideposts while we navigate our lives.

A conceptual understanding of God is a cognitive exercise, drawing on our intellectual capacities and our training to make sense of God. Conversely, understanding God's nature through divine imagery is an



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experiential and emotional activity,² a personal effort leading us to more fully experience who God is. Through this emotional work, we develop an understanding of how we feel about God and how God feels about us. I use the word "feel" because the term relates to emotion, and divine imagery connects to emotion within us.

Many aspects of the divine are revealed to us throughout Scripture: Jesus as the bread, the Holy Spirit as the wind, the church as the bride of Christ, God's word as a lamp, and so on. Each metaphorical image suggests a way for us to

relate to God. As we encounter the divine through images, we are drawn deeper into a relationship with God characterized by emotional connectedness.

1 Lauren Winner, *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 6.

2 Victor Counted, "Understanding God Images and God Concepts: Towards a Pastoral Hermeneutics of the God Attachment Experience," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015): 2.

Encounters with God through imagery

Below I share two personal stories to illustrate how divine imagery has guided me, including aiding me in better understanding my feelings toward God and God's feeling toward me.³ The first story draws on Scripture directly and is an example of how we can seek out divine imagery through the Bible. The second story is an example of how divine imagery can find us, or appear to us, in unexpected ways.

Story 1. As a teenager, looking for direction in life, I was intrigued by what would become one of my favorite passages of the Bible, Isaiah 55:10–11 (NIV):


*As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

In reading this passage at that time, I understood God's word as an extension of God. I could feel an emotional connection to God through this passage. The rain and snow fell on me and bridged the distance between the realm of heaven and the earth. The image of God as rain and snow helped my teenage self feel God's nearness when I felt distanced from God. If I had imagined a gap between heaven and earth, between God and me, the gap closed when I called on the images of rain and snow. The rain and snow became tangible descriptors of God, revealing God's nature to me. I felt touched and nourished by my creator, and I understood God to be a caring God who was willing to draw near to me. I wanted to feel a closeness to God during this season of my life, and this need was fulfilled by encountering God's image through Scripture. In this way, imagery revealed God's nature to me and allowed me to make an emotional connection to God.

Story 2. In the final days before his death, my father-in-law was receiving palliative care in his home. I saw him during the day and then went

³ These represent two of many methods for encountering God through imagery.

for an evening bicycle ride in the forest near my home to work out my thoughts and feelings about his approaching death. I was holding feelings you would expect when witnessing a loved one die; I was grieving for my anticipated loss, but I was mostly grieving for the losses being experienced by my mother-in-law, my husband, and his siblings. Beyond these feelings of grief, I also felt uncertainty about my father-in-law's last days because he was worried about pain control. While he was well connected to his palliative care team, his health was changing rapidly, and it was hard for the family to keep up with his new and worsening symptoms at home.



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As I cycled through the forest, a doe came into the path ahead of me. She stood still, and I stopped moving. We took a long look at each other, and a wave of calm and relief came over me. Then she moved back into the trees, and I continued to cycle with a deep feeling

of peace. In this peacefulness, I felt a connection to creation and our creator. At the same time, I felt the expansiveness and steadfastness of God across generations, and I had a sense of those who came before my father-in-law and those who were yet to come. I felt an emotional connection to God as I sensed the continuity of generations. Then, not long after, a buck came out of the trees. Again, I stopped, and he raised his antlered head as if to acknowledge me. He stood solidly for a few moments before he turned and walked back into the forest. I had an overwhelming feeling of the biblical text, "I am with you." I felt reassured by God. Whatever would come in the next days, my father-in-law would have the strength to face it, and his family would be fine after his death.

That day I encountered God as deer in the forest. These images revealed the nature of God and strengthened my understanding of God's presence in our lives. I had known this intellectually, but these encounters allowed me to feel them emotionally as well. On further reflection, it is no small thing these images of God, found in the forest, drew me into Scripture. It was in the forest that I truly *knew* the words of Isaiah 41:10:

*Do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.*

*I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

Psychological perspectives of divine imagery

As I reflect on encountering God through imagery, I wonder why we draw on images of God in our daily lives. Working in the field of psychology, I am quick to look to psychological perspectives to provide explanations

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for why we may draw on divine imagery, particularly during times of distress.⁴ From a psychological point of view, two main explanations come to mind regarding our encounters with God through imagery. The first explanation is our inclination to use spiritual-religious coping in distressing situations.⁵ The second explanation depicts our use of divine imagery as a form of attachment when we seek safety.⁶ Spiritual-religious coping and psychological attachment

are “resource” theories, which consider God a resource that preserves us or enables us to be well when our wellbeing is otherwise threatened by adversity or stress.

First, spiritual-religious coping involves methods related to the sacred, which enable us to deal with life events that we perceive to be negative.⁷ Spiritual-religious coping is tied closely to culture, including the culture of belief. Therefore, it stands to reason that individuals and groups who are

4 Stress is the strain that comes with everyday stressors and is both uncomfortable and commonplace. However, when these stressors become overwhelming, we are at risk of becoming distressed. For many, to experience distress is to experience anguish, suffering, or misery. Distress is more worrisome than stress because it is potentially harmful in the short- or long-term since distress challenges our wellbeing in a multitude of ways (i.e., physically, socially, psychologically). Psychologically, one aim is to cope with stressors so they do not become distressing and harmful.


5 Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (New York: Guildford, 2001).

6 Lee A. Kirkpatrick, “An Attachment-Theory Approach to the Psychology of Religion,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no. 1 (1992): 6.

7 Kenneth I. Pargament and Hisham Abu Raiya, “A Decade of Research on the Psychology of Religion and Coping: Things We Assumed and Lessons We Learned,” *Psyke & Logos* 28, no. 2 (2007): 743.

spiritual or religious may use a religious pathway to cope with adversity. Spiritual-religious coping includes prayer, reading Scripture, contemplation, using religious imagery, and more. Spiritual-religious coping functions to meet a variety of goals, including psychological goals (e.g., peace of mind), social goals (e.g., connectedness), sacred goals (e.g., knowing God), or a combination of these. Regardless of our goals, coping well with adversity can be enhanced by encountering God through images. This may be most true when people are supported in their social and cultural contexts by drawing on divine imagery. As a note of caution, spiritual-religious coping may be less effective, or even harmful, if it is not supported or legitimized by at least one important individual in the coping person's life. If not supported, persons who use spiritual-religious coping may find themselves feeling separate from their socio-cultural groups.

Attachment theory provides a second explanation for our use of divine imagery. This theory emphasizes the interactions between individuals and their caregivers or close others (i.e., attachment figures) when these interactions promote survival, safety, and security.⁸ Divine attachment figures (e.g., God) have often been closely aligned with parental



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figures (i.e., God as parent), so that encountering God through imagery provides the presence of a parent-like figure in times of need. For religious individuals, feeling emotional closeness to divine attachment figures may meet the human need for bonding during adversity. Seeking or receiving images of God that are loving and, in the best sense, parent-like is an example of the attachment process. From an attachment perspective, the emotional connection to God through imagery allows us a sense of safety. Divine imagery allows us to be emotionally near to God and facilitates our sense

of being known by God. Further, once formed, divine images are freely available to us at any time and can act as guideposts in our lives. We can call on images of God to accompany us and to support us as we celebrate,

8 Mary S. Ainsworth and John Bowlby, "An Ethnological Approach to Personality Development," *The American Psychologist* 46, no.4 (1991): 333-41.

mourn, endure, and search throughout our Christian journey. Through this emotional connection to God, we can be nourished, be supported in our labors, and develop confidence and courage when needed.

We are made in God's image

Regardless of the psychological processes or motivations for encountering God through imagery, images of God can meet our emotional needs and encourage us to change or grow as Christians. When I encounter an image of God, I have the opportunity to consider how this image informs my Christian life. I am challenged to ask myself what the image means for me as a person made in God's image and what the image is directing me to do or be.⁹ Each image may have a lesson that goes beyond meeting my personal needs. The image may encourage me to grow in my faith. It may encourage me to examine myself as one who is made in God's image, to wonder whether I am being challenged to bridge gaps like the rain and snow, or to be a calming and peaceful presence like the deer, or to stand solidly with others like the buck. As I ask these questions, I feel myself shift from the recipient of an image that meets my needs to a Christian who is growing and (hopefully) becoming better equipped to do God's work in the world today. These images ask me to wrestle with, and pursue, the many ways I might carry out these qualities of God in the world around me. Ultimately, being engaged with divine imagery can spur us to action. To me, this is both a challenge and a delight of encountering God through imagery. My hope is that we will seek out and study images of the divine in an effort to deepen our relationships with God. May these encounters flow through the church, challenging us to grow in God's image and further God's kingdom on earth.

About the author

Heather Campbell-Enns is an assistant professor of psychology at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She attends Homes Street Mennonite Church with her spouse and teenage children.

9 While writing this article, I had a conversation with Mary Reimer of Winnipeg, Manitoba, about divine imagery. I am grateful to Mary for challenging me to consider what these images are asking of me.