

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 184 - FEBRUARY 2008



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Nets that can't hold water

Over the centuries many descriptions of God have died, Christian lay author Val Webb observes, because continuing to use them required people living in one era to leave their minds behind in another. In her book *Like Catching Water in a Net: Human Attempts To Describe the Divine* (Continuum, 2007), Webb, who teaches religion at Augsburg College in Minneapolis and Whitley College in Melbourne, Australia, reminds us that containing God in any image is impossible. It's like trying to capture water in a net.



"For a long time," Webb tells us, "I let others believe for me, accepting their certainties in place of my doubts, but it didn't work, because we live with the consequences of what we believe or don't believe. ... If we imagine God as a wrathful judge on a high-flying cloud, sizing up our every thought and action to punish or reward, we will spend our lives cowering before such scrutiny, constantly fearful of overstepping the line." For her, images like this, which make God seem like a private eye or an Orwellian Big Brother, are unconvincing and unhelpful.



Change is overdue

Webb finds that many people have *no* useful divine images. Many have left their religious tradition, she observes, because its God was unbelievable and their churches, synagogues, or mosques didn't offer any new ways to talk about the sacred. "Deities still described in prescientific worldviews, breaking natural laws to punish some and not others," Webb observes, "no longer engage our technological age." We're long overdue, she therefore believes, for examining our portrayals of God, noticing how some are misleading, and making some changes.



Texts we need to challenge

Along with reminding us that we can't contain God in any image, Val Webb warns us about seeing all the Bible's words as eternal truths. In her opinion, "attempts to twist ancient experiences into timeless rules must be challenged, as Jesus challenged the rules in his day." She believes, too, that we must protest when Christians insist that some ancient laws are still valid today but others are not, as when some Christians quote Leviticus to oppose same-sex relationships but ignore Levitical prohibitions on blood-sausage.



"When the Bible (or any sacred text) is used to encourage hate, oppress human beings, incite violence against humanity or the earth, or to demand we leave our minds and experience at the door," Webb writes, "it behooves inspired or Spirit-breathed humans to go back to that text and liberate it from those who use it in inappropriate, non-compassionate ways. The Bible, like the sacred text of any religious community, is a guide from a particular context, not an eternal archetype into which contemporary experiences and knowledge must fit."



We are all inspired

Like many other thinking Christians, Val Webb finds it odd that although any other book as influential as the Bible would invite searching questions about its authorship and origins, the church largely discourages asking such questions about the Bible. Also, Webb finds it odd that we act as if God no longer does anything as important as what the Bible describes. "Why," she asks, "are stories on the last page of the Acts of the Apostles more sacred than events that took place the following week?" In her view, "we are all inspired people." Therefore claiming that the Bible is the only or final story negates what the Bible itself promises—that the Spirit continues to work.

Val Webb thus concludes, "We need to distinguish between words of Scripture that can become outdated, and the Word encountered both in ancient stories and today ..." I wish we heard that more often in today's churches.



Those in power rarely push for change

Pressure for such changes, like other changes in our life together, usually has to come from the people who are being overlooked or hurt. Observes Val Webb, echoing many others, “it has taken the poor of the world questioning their oppression as part of God’s plan, the church’s lay folk questioning their exclusion from certain privileges and sacred spaces, and women questioning their subordination as a Divine ‘order of creation,’ to challenge doctrines written by and for those with the power to do the writing.”

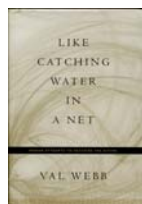


Those who have the power rarely feel much need to give it up. Consequently, pressure to stop using only masculine words and symbols for God may be more likely to come from women than from men, though many women don’t see how portraying God as male demeans them. Pressure to stop portraying God and Jesus as king may be not be likely to come from the rulers in our society. Pressure to stop seeing clergy as more Godlike than lay people may have to come mainly from lay people.

Useful tools for talking together

Val Webb’s book is full of compelling quotes from many authors, some ancient and some recent. Some are Christian while others are followers of other religions. They come from many parts of the world and many cultures.

That wide offering of descriptions of God is a helpful reminder of how many similarities but also what great variety exists in people’s efforts to describe how they understand and experience what we call God. In quoting so many different descriptions, Webb is reminding us that statements about God are “not eternal truth but human, finite explanations, useful tools for a particular time and experience, that allow us to talk together.”



What name tops your list of treasures?

In *Like Catching Water in a Net*, Val Webb continually emphasizes our tendency to be selective in what descriptions of God we claim as true. She quotes nineteenth-century English theologian Ben-

jamin Jowett: “We collect, in short, what suits our argument, and leave out what does not.”

I liked the way Val compared this tendency to searching for a favorite shell on the beach and then displaying our find in a special place. “We gleefully stop to scoop up ... one little phrase, like finding the perfect shell on a beach, putting it at the top of our theological list of treasures and arguing all sorts of things from it. Why? Because we like it.” We may cling to one particular name for God even though its meaning is problematic, she finds.



What’s your most cherished name for God? Do you ever think about whether it may have some meanings that mislead you, along with those that comfort you?

The most frequently used images for God seem to be those that portray God as a person, despite the fact that even in the Bible we also find non-personal metaphors for God.

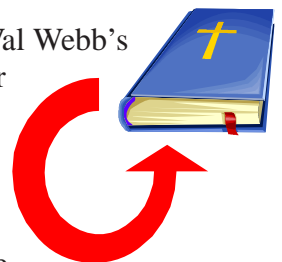
The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge.
—Psalm 18:2

Val Webb warns that “we must not let human images become the dominant or only ones, at risk of their being seen as literally true.” We often do it, however, because attributing

human characteristics to God is comforting. “We simply create a human-shaped idol,” Val Webb finds, “that responds appropriately to our needs.”

Circular arguments won’t work

I especially appreciated Val Webb’s warnings about using circular arguments to claim that certain biblical statements about God are uniquely correct, as many Christians do. “For many,” she notices, “the Divine exists because their sacred texts ‘tell them so.’” She points out that to argue that God exists because the Bible says so is a circular argument. “God exists because the Bible says so,” she finds Christians claiming. “Why is the Bible to be believed? Because God says so. Where? In the Bible.”



Webb tells about a student in a World Religions course she taught. When he heard claims of Judaism and Hinduism, he responded, “This can’t be true, because the Bible says Jesus Christ is the only incarnation of God, the only way, truth, and life.” “Why should a Hindu believe such a claim on such an authority?” Val asked him. It was a question totally beyond his ken, she found. He had never even considered that a different sacred text or God-claim might have validity. That’s something we all need to consider continually, she assures us.



We use so few images

Val Webb finds it unfortunate that we use so few images for God and that we’ve mistakenly come to believe that those few are literally true. They are metaphors instead, she reminds us, and many are expressed in words and concepts that are almost meaningless to people in today’s world.



“We have been so completely controlled by a selectivity of biblical images incorporated into our doctrines and art,” Webb points out, “to the detriment or devaluation of others.”

Our churches could help remedy this misleading narrowness by using a greater variety of God-images in worship services and by encouraging discussion of what our most-used images really mean and where they came from. Val Webb laments that “in many cases, the institution’s lack of flexibility to explore more adequate Divine images has sent seekers out on alternate paths.” We tend to label even great reli-



gious seekers atheists or agnostics, Webb observes, and that label is not always accurate. “Rather than apostates,” she observes, “they are usually deeply religious people who know what is lacking and cannot be content until they find it—or at least until they are satisfied that they have properly searched.”



Images that won’t hold up to scrutiny

Many of the descriptions of God that we hear most often are those least able to withstand scrutiny. “‘God is good’ is the Christian mantra for everything,” writes Webb. “The phrase rolls off our lips as if the Bible were saturated with this claim and there were no need for explanation or qualification. Yet this is not so.” She points out that in the Old Testament “the majority of phrases linking God and goodness ... are about Divine action, such as creating, enduring love, faithfulness, mighty deeds, and deliverance, and how these appeared ‘good’ to the recipients.” Also, the Old Testament includes many images of God as a ruthless warrior, which get used to justify violence in the name of God.



Val finds that “God is good” is surprisingly rare in the New Testament as well. She doesn’t mention the addition of “all the time,” which I often hear shouted at Christian gatherings. The Christians who seem to find this reassuring apparently ignore the bad things that happen in life. If not, they do elaborate mental contortions to convince themselves that God is not responsible for the bad things, or that they only seem bad but are really good.



This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 15 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



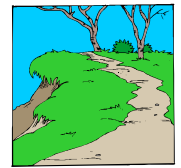
I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

A new Christianity is evolving

Val Webb believes that “a new Christianity is evolving, uncovering the human Jesus so long buried under centuries of dogma.” This change lets his teachings be heard in fresh ways and also lets more truths from Christianity and other religions be taken seriously. In her view, “it is the task of each of us to weigh all the evidence in light of our twenty-first-century culture and knowledge.” She is confident that when we do that, we will recognize that ultimate truth about God is never found. We will open the possibility of finding other truths that may not negate our own but rather expand them.



In Webb’s opinion, getting this expanded view is like traveling a road that winds to a distant horizon, rather than staying holed up in our backyard defending our turf. When we venture out onto the winding road, she finds, “we can appreciate the Bible as an inspiring record of human experiences written down in varying forms at different times as a guide for those continuing in the tradition, and culminating in the hope of a special person commissioned by the Spirit.” For Val Webb, this is the adventure of being alive.



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February 2008

In her book *Like Catching Water in a Net*, author Val Webb includes observations by many other writers representing many religions, about the impossibility of containing God in any single image even if it is an image favored by a majority and used for centuries.



Contemporary theologian Sallie McFague: “Theological constructions are houses to live in for a while, with windows partly open and doors ajar. They become prisons when they no longer allow us to come and go, to add a room or take one away—or if necessary, to move out and build a new house.”

Leo Tolstoy: “Wrong does not cease to be wrong because the majority share in it.”

Meister Eckhart (1260-1328): “Only the hand that erases can write the true thing.”

Theologian Marjorie Suchocki: “Theology is like a garment we have produced, not a universal truth. The garment, like all garments, will fit some, and not others. Should garments be thrown out then, because they do not fit everyone? Ah, then we should freeze in the winters of our loneliness! Better we should simply adjust the fit and see to helping others as they, too, weave their mantles.”



A Pacific island chief: “We know that at night-time someone goes by amongst the trees, but we never speak of it.”